The Wych Elm

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The Wych Elm

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Summary

The year is 1943. Forced to flee from the draft alongside his father, Will Graham stumbles upon a secret - the skeleton of a girl hidden away in the hollow of a dead Wych Elm.

The year is 1944. A year has passed, and the memory has been suppressed until it is nothing but a nightmare, until ominous graffiti begins to appear across the country. Alongside the mysterious Hannibal, the hunt for a killer and an identity ensues, with one question to be answered.

Who put Bella down the Wych Elm?

Notes

Playlist
Spotify link

Trailer

My super beautiful amazing artist

Prologue

Death had always followed Will Graham, wherever he went. Like a black shadow creeping over his shoulders, like an old friend who never left his side, like a growling dog whenever anyone tried to get too close, always on the attack. Will had gotten used to death's icy embrace, grown accustomed to her constant presence, had learned to accept her inevitability. He had never grown fond of it, but he acknowledged its presence and acknowledged the fact that it would never leave him, the only friend that would ever stay by him, no matter its destruction.

It had started with his mother, when he was just barely a toddler, due to complications in childbirth that left both his mother and his baby sister dead. What a shame it was that Will Graham's first memory, rather than sunlight shining through the bars of his crib, or chasing his dog Winston through the marsh behind his house on wobbling legs, was sitting awake in the middle of the night, hearing his mother screaming and crying in absolute agony as she died.

Death had let him be for a few years after that, having no one else to take, except for perhaps his father. Death had been merciful enough to leave his father be; though, what comfort was it really when the man made his life a living hell most days? It wasn't that he didn't mean well; it was the drinking problem that made him cruel, and the man had a tendency to drink himself into oblivion on a regular basis. Fate liked to deal him cruel hands, so he was left subject to his father's fits of rage, and hungover apologies the next day.

There were no friends for death to take from him, either, Will having always preferred to keep to himself. He was quiet, usually had his nose buried in a book, forever the peculiar one, forever the odd one. When he wasn't lost in the pages of his novels, he was down in the river with his rod in hand; the boy had been fishing since he was old enough to hold a rod, and somehow, the quiet of the stream offered more comfort than friendship ever had. He had always been mostly content with the characters in the pages of novels or the worms on the end of fishhooks for friends.

It wasn't until he was thirteen that death came round again and took everything that he had in one swoop. The war had begun and they were drafting everyone. War and his lover, Death, took the only boys he ever cared to call friends. Brian and Jimmy, the neighbor boys who he had called his best and only friends since he had met them, the only boys that he ever cared to run around with, they went first. They were older than he was by a good bit, eighteen and nineteen, and they were the first to get drafted. He remembered watching them from the window at his school, vaguely hearing their song through the glass as they sang an old war tune. *"Praise the lord, and pass the ammunition…"*

He didn't see them again after that.

But he heard the screams of their mothers, one on a Friday and one on a Tuesday, while he was getting ready for school. Their mothers letting out wails that he had only heard the likes of once, when he was two, and his mother held her baby, limp and dead in her arms. He remembered that she had let out a scream like that, mere minutes before her own life drained from her body and she died. It was the scream of a mother who had just lost her child.

Death came again later that same year. Will's dog, the dog that he'd had since he was a child, longer than he could even remember, was who went next. Winston died of old age, nothing cruel or painful like the others. It was hardly as significant as the death of his mother, or the death of his friends, but it certainly felt like it. His best friend, the only one by his side for as long as he could remember, had died in his arms after losing his legs, his sight, and control of his bladder over the course of a few months.

And death's shadow came over his doorstep again in a letter, in the year of 1942, when they threatened to take his father away, send him off with the draft to be slaughtered in droves, just like the others. But death's looming presence over their doorstep had forced them out the backdoor, fleeing from its stinging grips, the two of them packing up what little they had and fleeing to live with family across the seas in Worcestershire, England.

Will's life was uprooted without a friend in the world, without a place to truly call his home. Lost in his own world, well and truly alone. He had never been much of one for people anyways, but now that there was no one, not even his dog… It stung. It hurt more than he thought that it would. Much more.

He was alone in his own world, so he chose to escape to others.

The ground was wet from last night's storm. The April skies were gray, as they always were. It was England, pretty much always cloudy, as Will quickly learned, but now more than ever, it felt like. They'd arrived seven months prior, and the days were looking darker now, like the clouds were always on the verge of bursting, but Will couldn't stay inside any longer, staring at the same four walls of his bedroom. He was going mad. So he snuck into Hagley wood, only a few blocks away from his own home. He wasn't supposed to be there, and yet he'd found his way in, liking the solitude that the forest offered him.

He'd picked up J.R.R Tolkien's book, *The Hobbit,* a few days earlier, having saved what little allowance he earned for the past three weeks to buy it. He'd started it the day that he'd gotten it, but hadn't had time to finish it. But today was Sunday, which meant that he was free to do as he saw fit. And he was going to climb a tree, and he was going to read a book.

He'd grown up in the great outdoors, climbing trees and running through the mud and fishing when the weather allowed it. He'd always found a home in his books, but in a world where he never quite

fit in, the only place where he felt comfortable in his reality was outside. The prickling of grass beneath his feet, the crisp feeling of wind blowing through his dark curls, the smell after the rain, the feeling of bark leaving pink impressions in the palms of his hands as he climbed as high as he could get… That was where he felt free, even of the shadow of death that hung behind him, wrapped around him, enveloped him in its darkness. He was free beyond his four walls.

Will trudged through the muddy forest, the ground slippery beneath his tattered old shoes, hand-me-downs from his cousins that he'd had for years, just barely kept together. He pushed one hand into his pocket, the other clinging tightly to his book as he searched for a good tree to sit in for the day. Sitting beneath one wasn't exactly practical on a day like today, not with all of the mud and puddles, so sitting in one of the higher branches would do just fine. Besides, Will liked sitting in the branches, feet dangling over the edge, nowhere near the ground. It was almost like flying.

He scanned the woods, most of the trees covered in leaves, spring having brought back the green with it. Not very good for sitting in unless he wanted water dripping on his head and into the pages of his book all day. He settled when he turned and found an old, dead Wych Elm. Somewhat intimidating, sure, but big enough to climb, big enough to sit in, and free of leaves.

Will tossed his book up onto the highest branch that he could reach, careful not to let it fall back into the mud before curling his fingers around a lower hanging branch and hoisting himself up, the familiar prickle of bark against his palm as he climbed onto the first branch, and then the second, and then the third, until he was comfortably settled somewhere near the top, high above the world. Will had always been shorter than his peers by just a few inches, and found contentment in his trees, high above everyone else. Among the trees, among the grass, among the leaves, among the winds blowing around him.

He leaned back against the tree, glancing down to the ground feet below him. He probably wouldn't die from such a fall, but crack a few ribs, maybe. He wasn't afraid, though, had never been afraid of heights. Instead, being so far away, so far above the rest of the world, gave him a sense of peace. Of comfort.

He inhaled slowly, the scent of rain hanging thick in the air as he turned to look around him. The old tree was dead, hollow and rotting, making a good place to call home for wild critters. However, Will's eyes caught a glimpse of something stuck inside, perhaps shoved there, hidden away in the hollowed bark. It was off-white and stained with dirt and she, poking out beneath leaves and soil. Bone, he figured, though from his position, he couldn't quite tell what sort of animal it may have belonged to.

His father always said that it was curiosity that killed the cat, but always forgot the rest; curiosity may have killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back. Will could never help himself, always wanting to know everything about everything, never content to be in the dark about anything. Hesitantly, Will propped his book up on a higher branch before wrapping his hands around the branch he was on, lowering himself onto the next one before he was able to reach the thing that had been stuffed into the tree.

He dusted off the leaves and dirt before gripping hold and tugging, feeling something snap in his hands as he pulled it toward him. Bones. A skull, to be exact. His first thought was that it was that of an animal of some kind, something that had crawled into the hollowed tree and died. He'd found lots of skeletal remains of animals before, when he and Jimmy and Brian and Beverly would run around in the forest behind Bev's house, scavenging for bird's nests. There was nothing new about

that, though he didn't exactly recognize what kind of animal this belonged to. Bigger than a raccoon's, too wide to be that of a fox…

Then he saw the clump of hair sticking from its head. *Human* hair.

Dark, stringy, matted, nothing but dirt holding it to the bone. Long, dark human hair. There were two rows of teeth, crooked and yellow but absolutely and undeniably human. Will felt the air catch in his throat as his lungs began to burn inside of his ribcage. She was human. A human body stuffed down the hollow of a tree in Hagley Wood. Someone had put a girl down the Wych Elm.

He was mesmerized. He was terrified. The bone felt rough in his hand, gritty from the dirt that had collected over the years, decades, centuries that had passed since she had been placed there. She had been here a long time, that much was certain. She smiled back at him, face frozen in this permanent smile, with crooked teeth all exposed and hollow eyes staring back at him, laughing at him. In her mouth, he noticed a small piece of… Something. Red. Gingerly, he took it between his fingers and tugged, carefully, finding a piece of taffeta cloth shoved between her teeth to keep her silent in her grave. Will gulped, thumb running lightly over her jaw, captivated and captured by bone that had once harbored life inside. A brain, a heart, a life, a soul, now rotted into the hollow of the tree.

Will heard rustling. The crunch of twigs, foot pressing into the muddy ground.

It was enough to rouse the boy from his awestruck terror, bringing him back from his morbid curiosity as he realized just what he held in his hand. Will immediately threw it back, the bone suddenly stinging like fire against his palm as bile began to rise from his stomach and burn the back of his throat. There was someone there, someone following him, someone watching him. Her killer, ready to push him into the hollow of the tree along with her.

Will dropped from the tree, not waiting another moment. His feet hit the ground hard, the force of it reverberating through his bones. He didn't have time to process the pain as he ran, bolting the way he had came, disregarding his Sunday afternoon plans for fear of what he had seen, what he had witnessed, what he had done. He ran, ran like hell, feet sliding along the muddy ground, struggling to keep his footing as he ran, far from the girl in the tree.

Behind him, his book fell from its place in the tree, dropping into the mud, falling open on the ground.

"Far over the misty mountains cold… To dungeons deep and caverns old…"

Things Better Left Alone

Will missed Louisiana.

He missed blue skies, and he missed running through the swamps near his house with his dog and his friends, and he missed taking the train to New Orleans on the weekends and roaming the streets, bustling with life, and taking in the sights and the smells and the sound of jazz played in the streets. He missed not having nightmares every night about the red eyes in the tree, he missed having a real house instead of a tiny apartment shared with his father, he missed the life that he had taken for granted for far too long. He missed his home.

He had grown up in the great outdoors. It was where he was content. But now, the skies was perpetually gray and Will was oftentimes confined to four walls. The only forest for miles was Hagley wood, and he had stopped sneaking in there after the nightmares had started. There were no places to run and play and get out the energy that stayed pent up in Will's chest - not that he had any friends to run around with, completely and utterly alone, despite the fact that he had moved here over a year ago now. He'd tried, he'd tried so hard, but no one would deal with him. No one wanted to talk to the weird migrant kid.

Will had moved here when he was 15. By that time, everyone already had their friends, had their cliques, and Will was shy as it was, never so good at socializing, his only friends having been the dead neighbor kids. Will heard talk about the war on the radio all the time, and Will liked to lay in bed and think about how he would make a terrible spy. He couldn't even infiltrate the cliques at school - he would be hopeless infiltrating the Nazi party. His inability to find someone, anyone, to be his friend left him on his own, with no one but a drunk father and books. And Will, as much as he liked to be alone, he hated being lonely.

But there was no going back now, not until the war was over and try to rebuild what was now left in shambles, try and rebuild what was left in the ashes of their old life, if they had any chance in hell at all. Until then, he was here; going to school, walking the outskirts of the city, and trying to escape this homemade hell of his, trying to slip into some fantasy world because this reality wasn't exactly doing it for him.

The skies were gray. They were always gray. Always overcast, to a point where Will was beginning to forget what blue skies looked like, what it felt like when the sun shone down on his face and warmed his skin. It was always just this steady gray, like the whole world was covered in just this stupid, constant shade of gray. He had grown to loathe the color, grown to loathe everything about this god-awful town in a place where he didn't belong. Of all the places that they could have fled to, they chose the most boring town in the world. The grayest place on god's green earth.

Will pulled his jacket tighter around him. It was cold, too. At home, the weather would have been getting warmer, but here, it was always too damn cold. There were no warm, hazy summer nights, the sun so rarely beating down on his face. It was just cold and clouds, even as the winter turned to spring. Will kicked his foot against the sidewalk as he pushed his hands deeper into his pockets, walking the route that had grown so damn familiar, though he had never grown to love it.

These streets were no good, either. Will took the quiet alleyways to school, avoiding the kids that had to walk to school too, but sometimes they managed to walk the same paths he did and take him off guard. There had been several occasions when Will had shown up to school with a bloody nose

because of it, Will having learned fast that kids were cruel and would take any excuse to pick on the outsider. Anyone who didn't quite fit, anyone who was a little off, a little different, a little weird… Anyone outside of the norm was feared, and people grew to resent what they feared, and that resentment turned to unwarranted cruelty that Will had been the butt of on three, four, five, six different occasions this semester.

Will kept his head down as he walked as he usually did, avoiding eye-contact with anyone who may have passed. He didn't like eyes. They were too distracting. How could you really pay attention to someone when you were too focused on the eyes? See too much, don't see enough, too busy thinking about how those whites were really white, or how they must have hepatitis, or, oh, is that a burst vein? He made a point not to make eye contact with anyone, which he supposed didn't exactly help his case when it came to making friends.

Will made note of a group of kids in front of him. They were all from his class, and Will was pretty sure that he could see Bob Farmer standing at the head of them, the kid who had left him with a black eye two months ago. Will slipped into the shadows, something that he had grown skilled at, but he didn't run like he normally would have. They were all standing huddled in front of the side of the marketplace, all staring and discussing quietly in front of him, catching Will's ears as they spoke and remarked at whatever it was they were looking at.

"Who is Bella?"

"Hagley wood? You mean where old man Chilton lives?"

"That's the one. Apparently, some bloke went there last year and found a body in a tree, but no one ever figured out who she was or who put her there."

"So they don't know who killed her?"

"Nope."

"I bet it was old man Chilton."

"You kidding me? Have you seen that man? He's not got the upper body strength to put nobody in a tree. He can hardly drag his own ass up a flight of stairs, let alone put a grown lady inside of an old Wych Elm. It'd be a bloody miracle if he could put a dead squirrel down that tree. Nah, it was definitely somebody else."

"What if it's Jack the Ripper? What if he's back at it again?"

"You moron, Jack the Ripper was around over fifty years ago. He ain't killing anyone no more. He's either an elderly old man or dead. Plus, Jack the Ripper cut up his victims. The girl in the tree was strangled."

"Then if it wasn't Jack the Ripper, who was it? I don't see too many other killers running around. Other than Nazis, I mean."

"You think the person who killed her was whoever put this up?"

"Dunno. Probably."

“What if this means he’s back? What if this means that he’s gonna kill again? Maybe it’s not Jack the Ripper, but it doesn’t mean that we might not have another killer on the loose. Mass murderer, gonna kill us all.”

“What if he comes after one of us?”

“There ain’t no one coming after anyone, it’s just a sick joke. But if he does come after you ladies, I’ll fight him off. I can take the son of a bitch, especially for a few lovely ladies such as yourselves. He ain’t gonna get nobody.”

Will watched as they cleared away, scuffling off to school, waiting for them to clear so that he could see what the hell they were talking about. He would never outright approach them, always keeping his distance, always keeping toward the back. Will was never the best at socializing, always too shy to try and infiltrate into their groups. Though, perhaps Will wasn’t entirely interested in socializing with them anyways. He watched them scurry away, toward their school, slinking into one of the alleyways in hopes of going unnoticed.

Once they were gone and out of sight, sure that they weren’t coming back to pick on him, Will took a step toward the wall, pushing his hands into his pocket as he turned to see what was written there. He’d walked past this wall every day, had been walking past it every day for over a year now. This was the first time that there was anything interesting about it, usually bare save for the occasional flyer for war propaganda, or a sale down at the market, or something of the like. This time was different, though. Written in what looked like white paint, scrawled in messy handwriting, a single question.

“WHO PUT BELLA DOWN THE WYCH ELM - HAGLEY WOOD”

Will felt the blood drain from his face. Hagley Wood. Hagley Wood, Hagley Wood. He hadn’t been there in almost a year, had stopped going for some reason, though the reason had been buried beneath trauma and fear until he forgot all about it, the only remnants of what had happened buried so deep in the recesses of his mind that he could no longer find them.

It was like a dam had been built, holing up all of the memories, and it was beginning to leak. Springing free with memories best left untouched, best forgotten, best hidden in the crevices of his mind. There were some things that were better left alone, some things that weren’t meant to be uncovered again. And this… This was one of them.

Hagley Wood. Hagley Wood. Will stared up at those words, forgotten stories and forgotten terrors lurking in those two words. Stories long smothered and suppressed, but words could trigger memories, digging up secrets from the grave and slamming them back into the forefront of his mind. A line of graffiti unearthing memories meant to be forgotten, memories unearthed like the dead girl hidden away in the tree. It hit Will like a freight train, slamming against his chest and knocking the wind from him as he staggered back, hitting the wall opposite as he slid to the ground, knees giving out beneath him as he stared up at the writing on the wall.

The girl in the tree.

The girl that he had uncovered by accident, the girl that had sat in the palm of his hand, the girl that had been stuffed into a tree, the girl whose grave had been mistakenly unearthed by a boy trying to escape the rest of the world. The girl that Will Graham had forgotten, or pushed away, or buried again. The girl that the world had forgotten, her memory suddenly slammed back into the forefront of his mind as he stared up at those words.

Who put Bella down the Wych Elm? The words echoed around in his skull, the question rattling through him as that day played out again in his head for the first time since it had happened. He remembered the way that he had been mesmerized by the bone in his hand, the bones of a girl that had once lived and breathed and walked the face of the earth, now forgotten and hidden away in the trunk of a dead Wych Elm. He remembered the rustling of leaves that had roused him from his awestruck and terrified daze, the rustling that sent him running home with tears in his eyes and his heart slamming so hard in his chest that he feared it might explode. He remembered the echo of police knocking on their door, men in uniforms coming into his room as he struggled to sputter out his story, feeling the tears and bile threaten to rise in his throat with every word. He remembered the eyes in his dreams, the eyes he had thought the product of nothing but an overactive imagination, but no. Bella was staring back at him, her vengeance for his forgetfulness…

Will couldn't breathe.

He felt like he was choking, smothering, drowning as he stared up at the words written on the wall. He could still feel the grit and dirt and bone beneath his palm, could see her crooked smile, her hollow eyes staring unblinking… He couldn't breathe. It felt as though his lungs were filling up with blood and drowning him, leaving him panting and wheezing in an alleyway with no one to find him, no one to see him, no one to save him from his self-made demise.

Someone had killed that girl. For the first time, it truly and fully registered. She hadn't always been a pile of bones in the tree. She had been alive, with thoughts and feelings and experiences and memories. Someone had taken that from her, had stripped her of that life, had stuffed her body in the old, dead Wych Elm and left her there to rot. There was someone out there who had yet to pay for the life of this girl, someone out there who still roamed these streets, painting these walls, watching, waiting, taunting. Whoever had killed her was still alive. Waiting for the next kill.

The killer was out there. The killer was watching.

The killer was taunting him.

Will felt sick. He grasped tightly against the patches of grass that grew through cracks in the concrete as he stared up at the writing. He felt eyes on him, scanning over his body, watching him from a distance, just out of sight from Will. His chest heaved as he trembled, shaking hard as his heart slammed in his chest, threatening to burst as he sat there. It felt like it was all happening again. Like he was finding the dead girl in the tree all over again, asking the question over and over until he went mad. *Who put Bella down the Wych Elm?*

One hand slammed down on the concrete, pebbles leaving pink indentions in his palm, the other hand clinging to his stomach as it turned and revolted against him, forcing the contents of his breakfast onto the sidewalk beneath him. The bile stung his throat and the taste lingered sour in his mouth, but he couldn't keep it down, fear forcing him to his knees.

He couldn't stand. Couldn't move. His legs were weak, trembling, knees threatening to give out each time he made any attempt to stand. Instead, he collapsed onto the pavement next to his sick, staring at the sky as the gray turned darker, watching the clouds roll by as the sun set beneath them. Chest heaving, limbs trembling, losing track of the time, one question rolling around in his mind.

Who put Bella down the Wych Elm?

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His father was pacing so quickly that Will feared he would wear a rut into the creaky wooden floors, fearing that it may give out beneath him. He crept inside, catching sight of his father pacing back and forth before the man caught sight of him and finally stopped, staring at him for a long moment. His face flooded with relief first. And then, with fury.

“Where the *hell* have you been? You know you ain’t supposed to be out past dark, you little shit, you had me worried fucking sick.” He shouted.

Will’s lip quivered and he feared that he may collapse again, fall to his knees and bust out crying, but he forced himself to stay strong. He needed to grow up. He wasn’t some little kid anymore. He was sixteen, and he needed to man the fuck up, not let himself get worked up again. But he struggled to hold it together, anxiety building up in his veins and his chest and his throat, leaving him with weak knees and leaning against the doorframe, scratching absently at the white paint there.

His father was angry, pissed at him again. Hardly a new phenomenon nowadays. He got drunk and he got angry and sometimes he threw punches and hits and kicks. He had that same fuming look in his eyes, infuriated for coming home so late. But Will stared blankly into the air around his father’s head, not caring whether or not he was angry, not caring whether or not he got hit again, not caring whether or not he walked with a black eye to school tomorrow. All that mattered was one thing and one thing alone.

“Who put Bella down the Wych Elm?” Will whispered.

He figured that his father would know more about it than he did. Will had only spoken to the police about it once before proceeding to shove it down into his subconscious, doing whatever it took to forget about her. His hands were shaking as the words came out and filled the air, hearing those seven words banging against his own eardrums. In the silence of their home, the quiet of the air around them, they sounded particularly sinister, and Will wondered if the man who had put her down the Wych Elm was watching, summoned by the question alone.

“What?” His father inquired, brows knitting together as he stared at him. His eyes lost that look of pure rage and slowly simmered down to little more than confusion at his quiet words, like that was the last thing that he expected to come out of the boy’s mouth. This wasn’t the first time that Will had come home late, but it was the first time that he didn’t have a mumbled apology and a bullshit excuse on hand. Today, he came home with one question, and looking like he’d seen a ghost.

“The girl I found in the Wych Elm. In Hagley Wood, last year. Who was she? Who put her there? Who killed her?” He queried, begging for answers. His eyes began to brim with tears as his knees began to shake. How pathetic he must have looked, how pathetic he felt… He wasn’t sure why this had shaken him up so badly, but it was all crashing down on him and he could hardly breathe.

His father’s face lost all semblance of rage. The older man sighed and turned away, pressing his hand against his forehead as he turned away from him. All the anger that had been in him before melted away into something between sadness and frustration. Will stared up at him, hands shaking and lip quivering as he struggled to keep himself composed. Everything in him felt rattled to the bone, still reverberating through his body as he stood on shaking knees.

“I thought you forgot.” His father sighed, rubbing his temples. “You hadn’t mentioned it in so long, I figured you’d repressed the memory or somethin’, I dunno, I… Fuck, I’d hoped you wouldn’t ask.”

“There’s… There’s graffiti, and it’s… It’s about her, and I remembered and I don’t… I don’t… There was a girl in the Wych Elm. Who put her there?” He stammered, stumbling through his words as he struggled to stay upright, knees buckling as he clung to the doorframe to keep him steady. The handwriting on the wall was ingrained behind his eyelids, searing into his mind with one question, one haunting terrifying question, one that would haunt him until he knew. “Who put Bella down the Wych Elm?”

His father let out a long sigh before reaching over and resting a heavy hand on the boy’s shoulder, leading him to couch and sitting him down, as if preparing him for something utterly devastating. It was the same look that he’d had when he announced that they were running away, the same look he wore when he explained to him why he didn’t have a mom, the same look that he wore whenever he was apologizing for last night’s drunken beating.

“They tried, Will. They did, I checked in, thought knowing that they caught the son of a bitch would help you get over it, since you always had those nightmares, but… They never found out who she was, kiddo. With the war, the missing persons count is just getting bigger and bigger and they… I tried, Will. I wanted them to find the son of a bitch, but they just… They couldn’t find him. They couldn’t even find out her damn first name.”

Will’s head spun. The man who killed this girl was still out there, and they didn’t even know who she was. He felt sick. He felt like a little kid again, terrified to step out into the dark, hiding from the monsters that lurked there, but now they were stepping into the light, no less terrifying, coming to chase him in the light of day. Will’s fingers scratched and dug into the armrests on his chair, the sound tethering him to earth as he sat there.

“They… T-They didn’t find the killer?” Will eventually sputtered out, hands trembling as his gaze turned toward his father, the man staring down at him with pitying eyes.

“I’m sorry, kid. You know the world ain’t a fair place, and sometimes bad guys get away with bad shit. I had hoped that you’d… Forgotten. Put it away, you know. I didn’t want you to ask. This ain’t something that a kid your age needs to deal with. Ain’t something anyone needs to deal with. I’m sorry, kiddo.” He explained, trying to explain away the fear that filled Will’s chest, sitting in his lungs like lead, threatening to strangle him and leave him as dead as that girl in the tree. There was a murderer loose.

There was a murderer out for him next.

It couldn’t be coincidence, could it? The path he walked everyday, graffitied where he was sure to see it… Someone was watching him, someone was toying with him. Someone was trying to see how far they could push until they broke him.

The memories still felt heavy in his head, like iron in his brain, slamming in his heart and collapsing his lungs. He could remember the way that she felt sitting in the palm of his hand. The grit and dirt on her bones scratching against his skin, leaving brown stains against his palm and dirt black beneath his fingernails. Those hollow blank eyes that stared up at him, peering deep into him, capturing his soul in her gaze and threatening to drag him to hell with her.

But no. She was a girl. She wasn’t some ghost. Some demon that lurked beneath closed eyelids and haunted him in the dark. She was a girl, with thoughts and feelings and a life and people who loved her. Someone had created the monster that haunted his nightmares, someone had turned her into a demon, took the life from her and left her as nothing but a shell in a tree.

Someone out there had taken her life, ripped the soul and life and breath from her body and left her to decay, her skin rotting away until she was nothing more than a pile of bones left inside of the hollow of a tree. Someone out there had watched her die, felt the life leaving her body beneath his fingers, had dragged her to an early grave and hid her body away. Someone had dragged her down to hell, someone had left her to haunt the Hagley wood. Someone had left her to rot in the hollow of a tree.

There was a killer among them.

Someone put Bella down the Wych Elm.

And Will was going to figure out who.

Funeral March

It was always busy these days, even in small towns like this, towns he could hardly even bother to learn the names of. Quiet, sleepy towns roused awake by the war outside, forced to wake up in an ugly world of bombings and dead sons and Nazis. Will hated the war, and hated living here, right where risks were high of being killed. His father had insisted. They had family here, though it had been reduced from a whole family of uncles and aunts and cousins to just one great aunt, everyone else having died in the war. His uncles and cousins had died on the battlefield, his aunts and the babies all dead from the cold. It just left him and his dad and a great aunt who barely knew left from right anymore.

Will pushed his hands into his pockets and stared down at his shoes, waiting for them to call for him. He had checked in, and they had asked him to take a seat and wait. Nearly an hour had passed, and the place was packed with people asking about relatives and friends, sons and brothers and brothers in arms. *Where is my brother, he's stopped sending letters, is he gonna make it back alive, can I please just bury my son's body?*

It was sad, really. Will's angel of death was what tended to keep him company, but others weren't so used to the chaos, to the destruction, to the earth-shattering quake that rattled down to the bone when you learned that your mother, your friend, your brother was dead. That reverberation of white noise in your bones, the static in your ears as you struggled to hear what was being said, that space in your brain that demanded to be filled but was now hollow with the washed out memories of a dead friend.

"Mr. Graham?" An older lady at the reception desk called. Will's ears perked up at the sound of his name as he quickly rose to his feet, hurrying over before someone else could take his place.

He wasn't quite sure what he had come for. Why he'd come all this way, waited all this time, but he hoped it was for something worth it. He leaned over the counter, trying to hear over the sound of footsteps and sobs and chattering voices. Why the police station was so damned busy at ten o'clock on a Tuesday, Will wasn't so sure, but he figured that it was more than likely because there had been some attack last night, and they were reading it in the paper this morning. Asking what was known, asking who was killed, that sort of thing.

He had started to walk out a couple of times that day, but he decided to wait. War was happening, genocide was happening, there was death and fire all around, but he couldn't let the girl in the tree rest in the ground without closure. He couldn't let the man who had killed her go without justice.

"What can I do for you, son?" The woman inquired, leaning over the counter.

"I c-came to ask about a case from about a year ago? The girl that they found in the Wych Elm. D-down in Hagley Wood." He stuttered. He didn't like to talk about it, felt like the world might implode on him if he talked about her, fighting the urge to push it all down. It had been three days since he found the graffiti, and the thought still sent chills down his spine. The memory had been making him sick ever since it happened, but he forced himself to remember. He forced himself to be strong. If no one else was going to avenge Wych Elm Bella, then he would do it himself.

"Sorry?" She inquired, giving him a baffled look.

“The girl in the Wych Elm. They found a body stuffed into a tree?” Will replied, chewing down on his lower lip, beginning to bounce on the balls of his feet, hands trembling.

“Sounds familiar… Give me a few moments and I’ll get you the file, alright? You can go sit back down, I’ll be right with ya.”

Will gave her a polite smile and nodded before turning back to his seat, watching the hustle and bustle rush past him, people coming and going. He sat with his hands crossed in his lap, waiting, waiting, watching the world go by around him as he waited, waited to get started, waited to become the hero of this story. He sat as the sky outside began to turn dark, until his eyelids grew heavy and he struggled to stay awake, until the lobby cleared and Will was left alone, still waiting, still waiting.

Will lost track of the time, and wasn’t sure how long it had been when the lady finally came back with a small folder in hand. It was thinner than what Will had expected, maybe only two or three pages tucked inside. Will stared up at her, wondering how that could possibly be all that there was. She walked toward him before holding it out for him to take.

“Sorry I took so long. There was a lot to sift through, couldn’t find the file. I didn’t figure you’d wanna sit here all night, so I typed up a copy for you to take home.” She offered, and Will gratefully took it, opening it up to take a look. A police report, a report from the medical examiner, and a few pages of what looked like miscellaneous notes, maybe about leads, if he was lucky. He offered the woman a warm smile in return. It wasn’t as much as he had hoped for, but he supposed that there was only so much that could be done with the war happening.

“Thank you. Are you… Are you allowed to do that?” Will inquired. “Are you supposed to let me have a copy?”

“Kid, there’s hardly a damn thing in that file. We don’t even have an ID on the girl. Who’s it going to hurt?” She replied with a small smile, resting a hand on his shoulder. “Go on home. Get some sleep.”

Will smiled up at her, clutching the file to his chest before rising to his feet. It wasn’t a lot, but it was a start, and the police may have given up on her, but Will wasn’t about to. He was going to find out who this Bella was, and he was going to find out who put her in the tree. He nodded, offering a quick goodbye, before turning toward the door and heading out. It was dark now, and the curfew that had been implemented due to the war was getting close, and he needed to get home.

The sky was dark and the streets were uncomfortably empty. At home, down in Louisiana, it was warmer, still full of life, even in the midst of war. People roamed the streets at night, and they were friendly, always there to greet you with a hello and questions about your day, always warm. People here, though, were so terrified of the war, their heads so stuck in their own worlds, in their own lives, that they didn’t care about their neighbors. And now the streets were empty by eight o’clock and it left an eerie air of abandonment.

He didn’t like walking home like this. He didn’t like any of this. He didn’t like being here, he didn’t like the fact that he was the only one who cared enough to try and find the killer of the girl in the tree, didn’t like the fact that there was a war, didn’t like the fact that he’d been uprooted from everything that he’d ever known.

The cobblestone pavement was wet, glistening under the light of streetlights as he passed beneath him. He hardly paid any mind to his surroundings, too caught up in his own memories and self-pity

to care about anything else. Besides, what was there to see? Dark clouds, dark skies, dark towns… He was coming closer to home, though it was hardly a home, now was it? It wasn't the place where he had grown up. He had no memories here. He had no life here. The four walls where he currently took up residence, but what more was it than that?

Hell.

That's what it was. This was hell.

Will stood at the doorstep of his home, expecting his father to be in one of his usual drunken rages, but it wasn't his father that knocked the wind out of him tonight. Rather, it came before he even stepped into the house, feeling all of the air leave his lungs as he stared up at the red paint on his door, marking this home as hell here on earth, like some terrible creature had reached up from the pits of the lake of fire to scrawl it across the splintered wood of his door.

WHO PUT BELLA DOWN THE WYCH ELM?

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POLICE REPORT

Case No. 4815162342
Location: Hagley Wood, Worcestershire, England
Date Reported: 18 April 1943
Date Occurred: Approx. October 1941

Incident Type: Homicide

Role	VICTIM
Name	Unknown
Sex	F
Race	White
Age	Approx. 35 y/o
DOB	Unknown
PERPETRATOR	Unknown M (suspected) Unknown Unknown Unknown

DETAILS OF INCIDENT: Morning of April 18, Will Graham (15) discovered the decomposed skeletal remains of a woman placed inside of dead Wych Elm in Hagley Wood. Henry Graham reported this incident to the police, who followed up on the report, finding the skeletal remains in the tree. Body was extracted from the Wych Elm, entirely intact save for a missing right hand. Right hand was later found upon further examination of scene, buried approx. 7 meters away from the tree. After excluding all missing persons cases in England, identity of victim is still unknown. Identity of victim and identity of perpetrator yet to be identified.

AUTOPSY REPORT

DECEASED: Unknown
SEX: Female
AGE: Approx. 35

TYPE OF DEATH: (Suspected) Violent

DESCRIPTION OF BODY:

EYES: Unknown
HAIR: Brunette
MOUSTACHE: N/A
BEARD: N/A
WEIGHT: Unknown
LENGTH: Approx. 5ft
BODY TEMP: N/A
DATE OF DEATH: Approx. Nov 1941

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

Torn piece of red taffeta cloth was found in mouth
Right hand was not attached to the rest of the body. Was located two days later, buried near the tree.
Indication that she had given birth at least once
Signs of previous dental work
No clothes located, was placed in tree nude
Was placed in tree within 12 hours of death, before rigor mortis set in

PROBABLE CAUSE OF DEATH: Asphyxiation

MANNER OF DEATH: Homicide

August 1, 1943: A search for dental records was conducted. No conclusive leads. Case No. 4815162342 was not a resident of the United Kingdom.

March 12, 1944: First report of graffiti appeared in Birmingham. Appeared on a wall on Upper Dean Street, in white paint, reading, “WHO PUT LUEBELLA DOWN THE WYCH ELM?”

March 19, 1944: Four more reports of the mysterious graffiti (Back wall of Birmingham Public Library, on the left wall of Herman’s Bakery in Birmingham across from the police station, on a wall on LaFayette Street in Worcestershire, and on a lamp post on King’s Run), all some variation of “WHO PUT BELLA IN THE WYCH ELM?” Confirmed to be the same handwriting. Search has commenced for the person leaving the messages, suspected to be involved with the crime.

March 30, 1944: Resident of Birmingham, sex worker Maria Reynolds reported that fellow prostitute, known only by the name of “Bella”, went missing near Hagley Wood around the suspected time of death of ‘Wych Elm Bella’.

Will flicked through the pages, searching for some sort of clue, some sort of closure, some sort of lead, but was instead met with questions and dead ends. No one knew who Bella was, no one had come forward, the police had given up. Instead, all of this was left in the hands of a sixteen year old. Will gulped down hard as he flipped through the pages again. The police report, the autopsy report, and a page of scribbled down notes. Leads never followed and never solved. A weak investigation, a girl buried beneath war news. And no one else gave a damn.

No one but him.

Will's fingers grazed over the composite sketch of her. A beautiful woman, with mid-length brown hair, thin, a bit mousy but looking elegant. It was just a drawing, and who was to say that this was what she actually looked like, but Will immediately felt like he recognized her. Knew her. Of course, their only encounter had been from beyond the grave, Bella being long dead when they met, but Will still felt some connection to her. Like he knew her. Like he needed to avenge her.

Will traced her over one last time before lifting the paper and rising to his feet. He was going to go get copies made, hang them up around the town. What good it would do, Will wasn't sure, but there wasn't much else that he could think to do. It was something, at least. Not much, but something. Anything to keep her in the spotlight.

He rose from his bed and slipped from his tiny bedroom in the attic, wanting to get out of the house. Ever since finding the message on his door, written in blood, he knew that he was being watched. The killer was watching him, waiting, taunting him. He knew it. He wanted to stay away from that hell house as much as he could, wanted to run away, but until he could go home, back to Louisiana, back to his home just outside of New Orleans, he would wander the streets here. Hang posters, haunt the cobblestone streets like a ghost until he was safe.

Until Bella had a last name. Until her killer had a cage.

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Will tacked a page to a telephone pole, hammering the nail into the splintering wood until it stuck. The wind was blowing hard, making this task all the more difficult, between burning muscles in his legs from walking around all day and the fact that he could hardly see through the coming twilight, sun setting over the hills. Soon, curfew would start and he would have no choice but to go home, his task left unfinished, but he was going to get as many pinned as he possibly could.

He'd gone to the local print shop a few days before, had copies of Bella's composite made, and had spent the day hanging them. All around town, near Hagley wood, wherever he could think to put them. It didn't do much good - they would be covered up by war propaganda, get swept away and buried by war news, but he would keep going. He would keep her face in the public eye until she had a real name. Until she had a killer.

The streets were already growing quiet. It hadn't been particularly busy - not that it ever really was particularly busy, this place feeling more like Purgatory than a town, with people just floating kind of aimlessly through the streets, the place mostly deserted - but the occasional passerby had been something of a comfort. Now, wind blowing hard and the sky growing dark, it felt eerie. Like it was a true ghost town, like the rapture had come and Will was the only one left standing here.

He nailed another picture to a wooden fence surrounding someone's house. He didn't figure that it would be particularly appreciated, especially not with them hanging everywhere, but it was necessary. Somebody had to know who this woman was, where she came from. Someone had to
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know who had killed her and why. And Will needed to find this person. Needed to find him before Will became his next victim.

Pushing his hair out of his eyes, he headed down the block, toward the next pole. He was going to make sure that you couldn't walk more than twenty feet without seeing this girl's face. His feet thudded quietly against the cobblestone streets, head down and eyes averted, keeping himself as small as possible, hoping not to call any attention to himself. Not that there was anyone there to have their attention called to. But there was something eerie in these streets, at this time, where the streets were all abandoned.

It almost felt like he was being watched.

Paranoia, he told himself, but it felt like more than paranoia. It felt like there were eyes glued to his back, like someone was standing in the shadows, just out of sight, watching him as he worked. Like a creature stalking its prey, and Will was in the unfortunate position of being the stalked, waiting to be slaughtered by something bigger than him, something stronger, something that the boy couldn't even hope to save himself from.

He glanced around, scanning his surroundings. The shadows stretched long across the street, wrapping around him, threatening to swallow him whole where he stood. The black was threatening to take him away, leave his corpse discarded for the police to find when morning came. The darkness cloaked the alleyways, keeping his silent stalker hidden away, secret to him. Gnawing down on his lip, Will picked up his pace. Faster, faster, until he was running.

His calves burned as his feet slammed against the ground, head pounding and heart thumping and the world spinning. He lost track of where he was going, was unsure if he was running toward something or away from it. Maybe he was running away from the danger that stalked him, trying to hide like any normal person would do. Or maybe he was running straight toward it.

He was dizzy, and sick, and terrified, but he ran, ran as fast as he could until the papers were blown away with the wind and sweat was pouring down his face and he didn't recognize any of the buildings. He stood in the quiet, no sound more than the whistling of the wind in his ear. It suddenly felt cold, colder than what he thought was humanly possible, sending shivers down his spine, almost as though his brain had turned to ice. What were these street names, how did he get back…

Will's hands were sweating and cold, and everything burned. The sky was dark and stars occasionally peeked out from behind the clouds. There was something quietly eerie about it, something haunting, jarring about the atmosphere. Under the shroud of darkness, his would-be stalker was easily hidden beneath shadows. He was alone, and he was not, and he wasn't sure which was more terrifying.

Suddenly, a piercing whistle struck against his eardrums, slicing through the silent air as it began to pluck out a tune. A tune that Will knew well, a tune that Will had memorized. The first tune that Will could pluck from the deepest parts of his memory, a tune that still haunted his dreams.

A funeral march.

It was dark and eerie and rang heavy in his ears. He knew the melody by heart, from the cloudy memories of his mother's funeral to the vivid soldier's funeral held for his one-time friends. It was uncomfortable suits that were two sizes too big because they were too poor for a proper tailor. It

was inverted ties turned nooses instead. It was a weeping mother's wails and pleads to an uncaring god to bring her baby boy back. Dark and haunting and cold.

Will didn't wait for another moment. He ran toward the noise, not away from it. Suddenly, bravery took him over, a feeling of foolish strength as he darted toward the whistling, following the noise. He would not run and hide. He would not stand and wait, lie still to make for easy prey, stay and die like cattle. No, he would fight stand and fight, drag his shadowy tormentor into the light. He would chase after him, his stalker, Bella's killer, and he would stand, and he would fight, and he would prevail.

The song did not stop, rather leading him, always staying ahead of him, no matter how fast he ran. It was as if he was surrounded by the noise, and there was nothing that he could do to catch its conductor. It was a chase in futility, the noise leading him nowhere, as if the whistler didn't exist at all, a song out of a fever dream, as if this was nothing but. Still, he ran.

He ran until he was panting, until his head was spinning, and his chest was heaving, ran until he couldn't breathe. He ran until his knees hit gravel and he was at his own doorstep. He ran until the whistling went silent. Until he was alone again, and the air grew heavy, atmosphere crushing him beneath its weight. Like a ghost had led him home, to show him that he knew where he lived, to abandon him again.

Will pulled himself to his feet after a long moment, wondering if there had been any whistling at all, or if it was all some bad dream. He trudged slowly toward the door, pushing it open, discarding the words painted on the splintering wood, barely legible in the darkness. He slipped inside silently, father already passed out drunk in the kitchen, sneaking quietly up creaking stairs.

He was rattled, legs trembling as he collapsed onto his bed. There was nowhere safe, and Will knew it, but who was there to tell? What proof did he have? What would the police, police who had let an investigation of a murdered girl stuffed in a tree go cold without much of a fight, do for him? Will Graham was well and truly alone.

Tears burned in his eyes and his heart was slamming hard, even as he returned to the perceived safety of his bedroom. But he wasn't truly safe, not here, not in his own home, not anywhere. Safety didn't exist. If he didn't find the man who killed Bella soon, someone would be asking who put Will Graham down the Wych Elm. He could feel it. He could feel his own death approaching.

Will let out a long sigh, head lolling to the side as he tried to slow his heart rate, tried to calm himself down so that he could sleep, so that he could rise in the morning and return to his task. Search for answers, sift through the grand total of three pages of notes in hope of finding something resembling a clue. A futile fight, a pointless search, he supposed.

That was when his eyes caught it.

Yellowing parchment, rolled tight and tied with a piece of red silk, placed on his pillow, where it was sure to be found.

Will's brow furrowed tightly as he stared. He rolled over onto his stomach, plucking it up, disregarding any fear or apprehension. There was nothing that a note could do to hurt him, or even scare him, not after all that had happened today. He gently untied it, unrolling it as he held it beneath the light of his lamp. It was written in elegant handwriting, calligraphy, unlike the graffiti, written in black ink. Four lines.

WHO PUT BELLA IN THE WITCH ELM

WYCHBURY OBELISK

18/4/44

MIDNIGHT

Accord

It was too cold for April.

The wind whipped around him, threatening him with frostbite as he trudged through the cold. His nose was red and running, brown curls whipping violently around his head, and the fog of his breath clouding his vision. He pulled his coat closer around him, back pressed against brick walls in alleyways, staying within his shroud of darkness, protecting him from the police, enforcing the mandated curfew.

The curfew had been around since Will had gotten here, enforced since the beginning of the war. Will never minded it too much, only slightly inconvenienced when his walks lasted a little too long. He found, though, that he didn't much like it tonight, the streets eerily quiet, eerily dark and dreary. It was like a ghost town, like the rapture had struck and Will Graham was the only one left. Perhaps it was fitting. Perhaps he was marked by the girl in the tree, damned to hell, damned to walk the world alone.

Will shook it off and kept walking.

Normally, he would be tucked away in bed with the lamp on, reading until the wee hours of the morning before falling unconscious, good as dead until his father forced him from his sleep and pushed him into school clothes, off to another day of education, off to another day of staring blankly out the window until he could escape. How was he supposed to concentrate when there was every indication of a homicidal psychopath stalking him?

Of course, that was implying that he even fell asleep to begin with, which was a miracle on its own. Will didn't like sleep, not at all. It wasn't a rare occasion that he would go twenty-four, thirty-six, forty-eight hours without sleep, refusing to shut his eyes long enough to slip into oblivion. Nightmares always haunted him, no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried to make them go away. The eyes staring from the tree, the screams echoing around his skull, the funeral march played out by the beating of his heart.

He wasn’t sure what possessed him to actually venture out into the cold. It was a death wish, a suicide mission, but he went anyways, slinking behind corners and creeping through shadows in hopes of remaining unseen. He breathed in sharply, creeping through cobblestone streets underneath the crescent moon, timing his breaths, struggling to keep steady as he tiptoed through the silent streets.

Will knew the Wychbury Obelisk well, had passed it every time he had entered Hagley Wood, had darted past it when he ran from the tree. It wasn’t too far, but today, it felt like it was taking hours to get there. Trying to stay out of the light was taking more time than he thought it might.

Finally, finally, the Obelisk began to come into view, standing silent and steady in the field where he figured it had always stood. It took no handiwork, no craftsmanship, just had always been. Since the formation of the world, it was as if this Obelisk had just always been there. Had always been, would always be. When the world began to crumble, when the apocalypse shook the earth to its core and tore countries and lives to ruins, the Obelisk would still stand, silence and stone.

Beside it, however, stood the silhouette of a man. A man, flesh and blood and spirit, hardly as stone-cold as the structure he stood beside. Hardly as permanent. He would turn to dust in a few years time, because what was sixty, seventy, eighty years compared to eternity? A hat propped upon his head, head down, back pressed against the stone. He was mysterious, sure, but not frightening, not in the way that Will had been picturing him. He wasn't a monster, not some demon, not some devil. He was just a man.

A man who had been watching him. A man who, perhaps, had murdered the girl in the tree. But a man nonetheless.

Will reached behind him slowly as his pace picked up, hurrying up to meet him, somehow disinterested in the fact that he could have been running straight toward his own demise. What fear was there left for him? Hell had crept into him, had surrounded him, and now he was coming face to face with the devil himself. He pulled himself to the top of the hill, panting by the time that he got there, ready to stand face to face with his mortal Lucifer.

The smell of smoke became strong, suffocating, even, the man puffing at a cigarette. As he approached, even in such low light, Will could make out more of his features. He was young, younger than he'd imagined. Early twenties, perhaps. Sandy blond hair that hung somewhat sloppily over his forehead, like it could be neat with a bit of effort but he didn't bother. Instead, it remained tucked beneath his hat, adding to the air of mystery. His eyes were dark, staring down at the ground. He wore a suit, and an expensive looking one at that, though perhaps a size or two too big, like it was handed down to him rather than tailored for him. Not particularly intimidating.

Will felt no fear, but he was hardly an ignorant man. Slowly, his fingers dipped beneath his waistband, grazing at the cool metal. Will took a breath and held it until his head went light, slowly slinking toward him. He knew that he'd been seen, nowhere to hide, but as he grew closer, he stalked the man like an animal hunting it's prey, ready to strike. The hunted becoming the hunter.

“You're fifteen minutes late. I feared you may not show up. Terribly rude. You really should try to be more punctual, William.” The man scolded before raising his cigarette back to his lips, not looking up at the younger man. As though he was nothing more than a ghost. Nothing more than a shadow in the corner of his eye, undeserving of his full attention, and for a moment, Will wondered if there was anything deserving of his attention. He carried himself like a god, like he was invincible, and Will began to think that this man may be able to bring him to his knees. He stood with a gun in hand, and yet, he was well aware that this man was the more powerful of the two.

Will crept closer, pulling his gun down in front of him, finger on the trigger and ready to shoot, ready to kill. His father had taken him hunting before, back home. Taught him how to aim, fire, stalk his prey. He knew how to kill beast, he knew how to kill man. Even if he was the weaker, even if he was at the bottom of the food chain, if he kept his wits about him, he could survive. Survive against wolf, against lion, against man, against God.

“A gun? Tasteless. If you're going to kill me, please give me a bigger show than a bullet through the brain, would you?” He remarked, looking almost disgusted. There was no fear in him, almost like he had never known fear in his life. No fear of pain, no fear of death, no fear of God.

“My apologies.” Will replied insincerely, not lowering his weapon.

The man let out a long sigh, smoke swirling up into the air around him. He flicked his cigarette absentmindedly, like he could hardly be bothered with caring about this, any of this. Like he knew that he could win against a bullet, like there was no danger in this, like there was no one who could hurt him, even if they tried. He was invincible, and without the danger, he almost looked bored with all of this.

“I have no intention of hurting you, if that's what you're afraid of.” He insisted, placing the cigarette between his lips and raising his hands in surrender. “Pat me down, if you wish.”

Will studied him over a moment, and decided to step forward, keeping one finger on the trigger. One wrong move, and he was dead. Will inched forward, leaning to run his hands all along his body, checking for something, anything. A gun, a knife, anything suggesting malicious intent. Perhaps he had been unwise for coming here to begin with, but he wasn't going to let this man have the upper hand.

He smelled like cedar and chocolate and wine and smoke. Will gulped, trying to breathe through his mouth, praying that he didn't become intoxicated by him. He had all the allure of a god, truly. Tall, lanky, carrying himself with a certain swagger that Will found himself jealous of. He looked as though he could attract anyone to him, like a siren luring sailors to their deaths, but not quite in the way of beauty. Beautiful wasn't the word he would use. Intriguing, a true curiosity, maybe. A siren to lure men to their deaths, draw them in for the slaughter. And now, Will was his target, and he was struggling to pull against his magnetic pull. Though with that smirk that he was giving him was the younger man searched him down was certainly pulling him under, waves lapping at his throat.

Will’s hand found something in his left pocket, a small bump under the fabric. He pushed his hand into the pocket, earning a small, exaggerated moan from the man’s lips, a sound that sent tingles

down his spine. He felt something jerk within him, something drawing toward him, some magnet in the pit of his belly, drawing him ever closer. Will's breath hitched as he pulled away, finding a pocketknife sitting in the palm of his hand. Gorgeously engraved wooden handle, sharpened blade… Family heirloom, perhaps.

"Not gonna hurt me, huh?" Will remarked.

The older man leaned forward, snatching it up before Will could even react. He pulled his gun tighter, aiming it straight at his head. That knife was no match for his gun, but even still, he found himself anxious. Who knew what he was capable of? Who knew if he could even bleed? For all Will knew, he could be god. Or the devil.

"Please. This isn't for you. It's not even big enough to cause anything more than a flesh wound." He explained, admiring the glinting in the moonlight as the twirled the blade between his fingers. "Unless, of course, I were to slit your throat. Which, I assure you, I am perfectly capable of. But I won't. Too messy. I dislike mess." He said, before drawing back. "Well, I dislike being messy. Mess can be quite beautiful when done properly. But nonetheless, out here in the open, I'm unprepared for such a bloody display. I assure you, you are safe."

Will stared, awestruck and silent. This man, or whatever he truly was, was a lunatic. A madman. This truly wicked thing, this nefarious beast, standing right in front of him. He cocked his gun, ready to shoot, ready to kill. Perhaps it would do the world some good, kill this monster, despite all his intrigue.

"I won't kill you. I've no reason." He assured, leaning back against the obelisk, letting the smoke from between his lips fill the air around them.

"Then why bring the knife?" Will inquired, eyes lit like fire as he circled him, inching closer.

"Do you really want to know?"

Will nodded.

He smiled and pushed up, stepping closer, then past. Will's aim followed him as he walked toward the cluster of trees at the bottom of the hill. An orchard. Will had been here before, once, on a sunny afternoon in the late summer, hanging to the opposite end of the orchard, not daring to come too close to Hagley Wood. He had suppressed the memory of the girl in the tree, but he had always felt wrong when he came close. Now, he wasn't afraid. He was too intoxicated on his own adrenaline to be afraid.

He watched as the older man slipped between the trees, not lowering his gun until he reached up, hands curled around an apple, little and green and far from ready to be eaten. He remembered days when he would eat apples that way, tiny and sour, stinging in his mouth as his eyes scrunched up and he shivered with the taste in his mouth. He watched as the man pressed his knife into the peel, carving out a small slice and bringing it to his lips, lips curling around the blade.

"Apples." He chuckled quietly, leaning up against a tree. Will studied him - *really* studied him - for the first time, slowly lowering his gun. He was elegant, carried himself with a certain swagger that Will wished he had. He was graceful, and majestic, godlike. His blond hair was tucked neatly into his hat, poised, a bit like a businessman. His features were sharp, chiseled, handsome. "I like them this way. Bit too sour. All of the flavor far too concentrated to one spot. But it brings me back to

simpler times. Scrunched up noses, filled up much too full for dinner… Better times. Before the war." He mused, cutting out another piece and tossing it into his mouth.

Will began to relax. Strange as this man was, he didn't seem to want to hurt him. Not now, at least. Will let out a quiet sigh and clicked the safety back on, tucking the gun back into his waistband. He let out a breath, staring up at the man as he carved at the apple until it was gone, then plucked down another one. He went through them quickly, with ease, leaving no mess. He seemed as though poise was engraved in him, like human instinct had been burned out of him and he was some porcelain god.

"Who are you? Why are you stalking me?" Will inquired, eyes pleading for answers. He was done faking strength. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now, so he demanded them. Voice loud, shoulders back, forcing all fear from his body and into the earth beneath his feet.

"Your answer will come. Patience, dear boy. Patience is key. You won't get anywhere demanding answers and waving a gun, as you so rudely displayed tonight. Patience." The older man chuckled, popping a piece of his apple into his mouth before discarding of the core, leaving it for the earth to devour again. He pulled another cigarette from his pocket and steadied it between his lips, lighting it quickly and leaning back. "Tell me about yourself."

Will stared, dumbfounded. Of all the ways this was meant to go, this was not one of them. The man was meant to kill him, or die trying. The man was meant to reveal secrets to uncovering the mystery of the girl in the Wych Elm. This meeting was meant to hold secrets that Will had been sure he would carry with him to his grave, however soon he may find it. It was hardly meant for chit chat.

"What do you want to know?" Will inquired warily.

He pulled his cigarette from his lips, smoke following after, blowing away from Will so that he wouldn't choke. "Who are you? What are your aspirations? I don't entirely care what you tell me, so long as it's about you. Who is William Graham at his core?" He inquired, pulling the cigarette back between his teeth.

"My name is Will Graham. I'm sixteen years old. I found a dead girl in a tree last year." He replied, hoping to navigate the conversation back towards Bella.

"That's nothing to do with who you are, Will. We'll discuss Bella soon enough. Right now, I want to hear about you. Who is this boy I invited to meet me here at midnight?" He inquired before chuckling to himself. The way he put it, it sounded scandalous, like lovers meeting under the stars for a night of romance, not so much the battle that Will envisioned it as.

Will paused a moment. "I like to read." He finally answered.

"Good, good. What sorts of books do you like to read, William?"

"Adventure books. Something better than here. Something a bit more whimsical than Worcestershire." He explained, opting to open up, if only a sliver.

He smiled.

Silence settled over them a moment as Will leaned back, plucking an apple for himself and taking a small bite. To the outside, perhaps they would look like old friends, two boys hidden away past

curfew in an orchard, plucking too-ripe apples down and talking about whatever rolled through their heads. Like they'd known each other for eternity. Perhaps they had, in some other life. Perhaps they were destined to find each other, fate pushing them toward one another.

“What do you see yourself doing in a few years time? What do you imagine for your future?” The older man inquired.

Will chuckled bitterly, spitting out one of the apple seeds and letting it sink into the mud. “Can't imagine having much of one. My dad will beg me to run like he did - my parents always ran. My mom ran away from her family, to my dad and me. Dad says she tried to run from him, only stayed because she found out she was pregnant with my sister. My dad uprooted our whole lives and moved us here to run from the war. They've spent their lives running, and I'm done. I suspect I'll go back. When I'm 18. Finish getting my education. Then I'll take a boat home. And I'll get drafted, sent out to war, and I'll die on the battlefield. I don't plan to live past twenty.” He explained, bitter and sullen as he spoke.

He had been younger once, been more naive. He'd once hoped to be an explorer, discover parts of the world yet to be unearthed. Or perhaps he would be a simple fisherman, casting his line to see what bites. Or a hunter, though he much preferred the tug of the line to the kickback of a gun. But he'd resigned himself to the fate of a soldier, because that was all anyone was. No matter how fast you ran, they'd catch up to you and send you off to war. Haul you off to jail if you refused. There was no choice, there was no end. Just war and blood and death.

“And you aren't a runner, then.” It sounded like a question but was said like a statement. Like he already knew all that he needed to know about who Will Graham was.

“No. I'm not.” Will said confidently. If there was one thing he was proud of, it was his own strength. Strength he found within himself, no matter how foolish. “My parents ran at the first sign of trouble. I seem to attract it.”

“Or perhaps you run toward it.”

The air fell silent as the man discarded of his cigarette, putting it out with his shoe before reaching up for another apple. They stood in silence, comfortable in the quiet for just awhile. Words didn't need to fill the air, the two of them relaxing in the other’s presence. Perfect strangers, yet somehow at ease. Strange, how the man that could so easily have lured him to his death could make Will feel the most at ease he'd been in weeks.

“I’m intrigued by you, Will. I’ve had my eye on you for some time now.” He confessed, taking another bite of the apple. He looked up into the sky, staring up at the few stars that could be seen through the clouds, almost like he was more intrigued by stories told in lights than he was by the boy standing in front of him. He seemed to regain an air of cockiness as he stood, erecting his arrogance like a wall to protect himself. He was polite, sure, but bored-looking. As if he were expecting more grand than having a gun pointed at him. Like his expectations had not been passed.

“How do you even know who I am? I have no idea who the hell you are.” Will queried, coming back to his own. Skepticism, wariness, on the attack should he make one wrong move. His eyes narrowed, skepticism and anger filling him again. Perhaps a bit irrational to let his emotions get in the way when he hardly knew the story, but what more was he supposed to do?

“Your name was in the papers, back when you found the girl in the tree.” He replied. “I tracked you down, but by the time I had, you didn’t seem to remember a thing. You didn’t talk about it, you

weren't looking for her. The only thing that I noticed was that you always stayed far from Hagley Wood. Far away from here."

"Why watch me, then? Why play games? I don't know anything about this girl. I'm just the one who found her, I don't know anything more."

"Not yet, you don't. I wanted to push you. Whisper through the chrysalis, see what comes out. What becomes of you. So I gave you a push. I plastered her name across the city, across the country. You remember now, don't you, Will?"

Will stood silent. What was there to be said, what was there to do but run or stand frozen? This man was a psychopath, had to be, right? Will stood wary of him, unsure of what to say, unsure of whether he should run or if he should stay.

"You remember the way you felt when you held the shell of her in your hands. You remember the thrill, the power coursing through your veins. Imagine it, imagine how he must have felt, feeling the life draining from her, her body growing cold as she fell limp in his hands."

His words slithered into Will's cranium. Some hypnotic drawl had him trapped, entranced, hanging onto every word as he slowly fell into him. His voice had hold on him as he swayed back and forth. He could feel her again, pressed against his palm. He hadn't felt fear upon finding her, not the way he'd tried to make himself believe, as if repeating it enough times would make it any more true. He hadn't been afraid, dropped her bones back where he found them the moment he realized what they were, hadn't stumbled over his feet as he bolted away. No, he had stayed. He had lingered.

He had been intrigued.

"It mesmerized you, seeing her, didn't it? You were as intrigued by her as I am by you. Perhaps you were wondering who could have done this, and why. Perhaps you were curious. Perhaps you were angry and wished for justice… Or perhaps you wondered. Perhaps you wondered what it was like to take her life. Perhaps you felt powerful, some lingering aftermath, something so simple as holding something that once harbored life in the palm of your hand making you dizzy with the power of the creature that took it. But you didn't run… Did you?"

Will's face contorted and something like rage filled him. Infuriated at the very suggestion, at the very thought. Or perhaps infuriated by how correct he was. Biting hard on his lip, Will pulled his gun again, aiming for the space just between the older man's eyes.

He held his hands up in surrender, taking a step forward. Counterintuitive, so it seemed, but he seemed undeterred by this fact. "I apologize, Mr. Graham. I had no intention of offending you, I assure you. I hoped to spark your memory, but perhaps some things are best left suppressed."

Will just snarled.

"I suppose you must think this all very odd. All very scary, but I assure you, Will, you've nothing to be afraid of. I'm not going to hurt you, you have my word. Quite the opposite really. I admire you. You… Fascinate me. Anyone else would run from this, but you, you, dear boy, you run straight toward it. You're different from the others. You're… Brave. Braver than most I've met. I like that." He mused, peering up at him from beneath his hat.

"And what do you care?" Will demanded, waving his gun. "What do I matter to you?"

“You're everything.”

Will stared in silence, thumbing at the cool metal of his gun as he stood there. His finger twitched around the trigger, even as he slipped it back into his waistband. This man, whoever he was, had been watching him. Was obsessed with him, perhaps. Something between terror and intrigue struck through him, telling him to run yet forcing him to stay, caught in this eternal limbo. Damned to an eternity of standing here, listening with rapt attention, forever contemplating the pull of a trigger yet never being able to make up his mind. What did he mean, what did he know? Should he be charging forward or retreating to the shadows?

“You, William, you run. Like your father, like your mother. Never confuse yourself as anything else. The only difference is the direction in which you are running. You want to find Bella’s killer so much that you would wander to an ancient old obelisk in the middle of the night to meet a stranger who could very well slaughter you where you stand. Still, you run toward it, straight into the arms of certain demise. You're a rare breed, William. I admire that. I'm intrigued.” He mused on, taking a step forward as Will took a step back. He took another inch closer, and Will took another inch back, and so the dance continued until Will was cornered against a tree. “I want to help you, Will.”

Will blinked, once, twice, until it began to make sense, though it never really did. Help. Help, coming from the man who seemed to have the answers, hidden beneath shrouds of darkness. Help, coming from a perfect stranger who had been following him, making his life a perfect hell. Offering his assistance.

“I don't even know your name.” He breathed.

“Of course, how rude of me. The name’s Hannibal Lecter.” He replied with a small smirk, offering a tip of his hat.

“Odd name.” He remarked, earning a small chuckle from the older man.

“The name is irrelevant. My offer is on the table, William. I want to help you. I want to help you find Bella’s killer. What do you say?” He stuck out a hand for him to take. “Do we have an accord?”

Will could already feel it - death, his old friend, creeping over his shoulder, wrapping around him. Perhaps its icy grip would strangle him this time. Take him into the black. Perhaps her cloak would take him and smother him in darkness, leave him dead right there. Perhaps she would take him now, skip the mess - he figured that Hannibal might appreciate that. Or perhaps she would let this play out, but either way, it ended the same. One thing was certain.

This partnership would lead them down the path of mutual destruction.

That was why he couldn't explain why he sold his soul, firmly gripping his hand and shaking hard. Damn the consequences.

“We have an accord.”

Train Tracks

At first, he had chocked it all up to being a dream. In his first moments of waking, as his mind came to him just before his sight came into focus, he had hoped it all to be resigned to a bad dream. The move, the girl in the tree, the graffiti, the obelisk and the apples. As he woke, though, sight coming into focus, in his shabby little bedroom, gray light streaming through the dusty window, the case file strewn about the room, at least the majority of those turned out to be very and unfortunately true.

Though perhaps Hannibal Lecter had been little more than a dream. Perhaps his death omen had all been in his head. Hell, he couldn't remember how he'd gotten into bed, couldn't remember falling asleep, couldn't remember walking home. Perhaps it had all been some crazy dream. The illusion, the hope, however, was shattered at the sight of his muddy clothes lying in the corner and the lingering taste of apples in his mouth.

He moved sluggishly, forcing himself out of bed. He moved in a haze, throwing on his clothes, floating down the stairs like a ghost, moving through the streets in silence. The day passed in a haze, trying to remember the night before, trying to *think,* though little was coming. It almost felt as though he had become little more than a ghost, just as dead as the girl in the tree.

As the day passed hazily, Will found himself wandering back home, following the same old routine he always followed. Perhaps he would collapse in his bed, drift into unconsciousness, let the cold black take him again. Maybe he would walk until he found somewhere to read, somewhere quiet to clear his mind. Maybe he would find his way back to the police station, see if there was anything new to report on Wych Elm Bella.

Though his plans were all quickly dashed at the sight of what sat on his bed.

Hannibal Lecter was on his bed.

Legs crossed, leaning against the headboard, face mostly hidden by the folder than contained the papers on Bella. He looked mostly nonchalant, like he was exactly where he was meant to be, like there was no question in where he sat.

“My apologies for coming in through the window.” He said, nodding toward the open window, curtains fluttering in the breeze. “Dreadful etiquette, I know.”

Will’s throat tightened painfully, legs threatening to give way. His heart thudded hard in his chest, so hard that he feared it may reverberate through his ribs so hard that they cracked and splintered. He supposed it was the shock, finding him where he wasn't meant to be, and the undeniable confirmation that yes, last night was real.

“You really ought to buy a watch. You are making a habit of being late. You said you'd be home twenty minutes ago. Terribly rude, my young friend. Terribly rude.” He scolded, putting down the folder and catching his eye, making eye contact that Will hastily pulled away from.

“I don't…” Will stammered out, trying to remember. What vows had they made, what had been said? They had agreed to work together, against Will’s better judgment. And what after that? What arrangements, what agreements had been made? There was nothing but blackness. Blank. He didn't remember the rest of their conversation, didn't remember the walk home.

He couldn't remember the walk home.

Everything felt like he was moving in some sort of haze. There were gaps in his memory. There were holes and he didn't know how to fill them again. It was growing worrying, knowing that there were parts of the story that he had somehow forgotten. It was like the touch of Hannibal's skin against his had been all that it took to drive everything out of his mind for the rest of the night, shorting out whatever made his memory stick. The shaking of hands and then nothing. Vows made and then nothing. Accords stricken and then nothing.

Hannibal sat more upright, seeming to notice his anxious disposition. Will wanted to pull himself together, wanted to maintain some stony demeanor, but he was lost in his own head. Spinning with fear and anxiety, some pit of dread weighing in his stomach. Everything felt knotted up and heavy, like he may sink straight through the floor at any moment. And Hannibal Lecter was staring right through him.

"All aside. I say we waste no time. Bella has waited long enough." Hannibal suggested, opting not to mention Will's obvious anxiety. He reached down, adjusted the papers inside of the folder before tossing it to him from across the room.

Will tentatively took a step forward, taking a seat at the edge of the bed and flipping open the file as though he hadn't already memorized every word. Hannibal scooted toward him, taking his seat directly beside him, their shoulders bumping as he peered over Will's to get a better look. Will felt an odd sense of ease here, next to him, like it was safe. Like it was alright to sit in such close quarters, where he could so easily be slaughtered in a heartbeat should he decide to do so. This stranger stood as a death omen, and Will could feel it in his veins, and yet, there was no fear in him.

"I found a note on the last page quite interesting. This Maria Reynolds person. Reported a fellow prostitute missing. The timeline seems fitting. And her last known whereabouts were just outside of Hagley Wood. Not to mention the name. What say you? Should we follow up on the lead?" Hannibal suggested.

Will gulped down hard, turning slightly toward him. "Where would we even start?" He inquired, stupefied at his eagerness. "We don't have a location beyond Birmingham. Where -"

"She's a sex worker. There are only so many corners to be worked, William. If we hurry, we may be able to find her before sundown."

Hannibal pulled himself off of the bed. The night before had been full of talking, of meandering on, putting off what Will had came for. Now, the talking was what Will yearned for, if only to make this feel more real. But of course, he decided otherwise, talking quickly, moving quickly. Quickly, quickly, far too quickly. As if the man he met in the orchard had turned into something else entirely.

Still, Will stood, as if on instinct, following his lead. Like he was supposed to. Moving as if under the instruction of some invisible puppet master.

"Shall we, then?" Hannibal said with a small smirk.

Will nodded.

Hannibal smiled and held out a hand for him to take. Will just walked past.

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They didn't find her by sundown, nor by sundown the next night. After three days, they finally found the mysterious Maria Reynolds. The train rides were long, though never tedious, not with Hannibal to talk to, even when their conversations grew darker. But Will never feared him, rather growing to enjoy the company of him. Perhaps he was a bit mysterious, and perhaps Will could never quite figure him out, but he was fascinated to say the least.

Hannibal never spoke about himself. Never let on to anything about himself, about his past, about who he was, even when Will tried to push. He was a master at changing the subject, at skirting around anything that he didn't want to talk about. Even when Will noticed, he never pushed further, opting to respect him. Instead, they discussed the case, and the girl, and philosophy, and whatever else they could think of. Never anything too personal, never anything too close. And yet, even though Will hardly knew a thing about the older man, he felt as though he had known him for decades.

On the third day, they found her. She lived in the outskirts of the city in a small flat, as they learned after asking around - well, Hannibal asked around. Will mostly lurked quietly behind him. All the same, after many unsuccessful encounters with nothing but a name, they at last found her.

Will followed Hannibal up the steps, standing just behind him as the older boy knocked on the door. Will noticed his confidence, a confidence that he himself had never harbored. Hannibal didn't hesitate to knock, didn't hesitate to speak, didn't seem to pay any mind of what people thought of him. Perhaps he was already aware of the swagger and charisma that oozed from him, or maybe he thought himself a god among men, above mere mortality. Perhaps he didn't think them worthy of his fear.

The door swung open to reveal a curly-haired lady, who seemed to be both drunk and hungover at the same time. Her fiery hair stuck in odd directions as she clutched the door for support, eyes glassy and reeking of booze. However, despite her demeanor, Will could sense that she knew more about the world than he would ever know.

Perhaps that was why she drank. To forget what she knew.

“Miss Reynolds, I presume?” Hannibal greeted, hands folded behind his back.

“Depends. Who's asking?” She slurred.

“Graham, Lecter.” He introduced. “My associate and I work with the Worcestershire Police Department, we’re here to follow up on a report you made on March 30th regarding the body of the unidentified woman found in Hagley Wood last year.”

Her glassy eyes scanned them over before crossing her arms across her chest. “Don’t look like police to me. He doesn't look more than… what, twelve?”

“I'm sixteen!” Will protested angrily, without thinking or sticking to any sort of unspoken plan.

Hannibal shot him a disapproving look. “An apprentice,” he desperately scrambled for some sort of save.

The woman rolled her eyes, starting shut the door before Hannibal slammed his hand against the heavy oak, refusing to let her shut the door, refusing to let her get away from them so easily.

“Ma’am, if you would just give us a few moments of your time. We’re only trying to confirm that the missing woman that you reported is the same as the woman found in the Wych Elm. Please. We’ll only take a few moments of your time, I promise you.” Hannibal insisted, not taking no for an answer.

She stared at him with a mix of annoyance and defeat, like she wasn't quite in the mood to argue with him today, like it would just be easier to let him in and answer the questions of two boy detectives with pipe dreams of solving a cold case than to argue with them. She let out an exaggerated groan and held the door open.

“Fifteen minutes. That's all ya get.”

Hannibal smiled and nodded toward her as she led them into the shabby flat. It reeked of booze and rot and dust, suggesting that her only purpose here was to drink and sleep, the place seeming otherwise unlived in. Dust covered the shelves, and the furniture, and the floors. The only place that looked as though it had been touched on the past ten years was the couch, which looked recently slept upon and was covered in stains.

“Whaddya wanna know?” She slurred, grabbing a half-full bottle of vodka off the floor and taking a long drink. By the looks of her, Will wouldn't have been surprised if she had only just started it that very morning. Will gingerly slid into one of the two wicker chairs sitting parallel to the couch, feeling as though it may snap beneath his weight. Hannibal, however, sat without a second thought, unbuttoning his jacket and crossing his legs.

“We want to know about this Bella that you reported missing. Just a general physical description, is all.” Hannibal explained.

The Reynolds woman leaned back, nursing at her bottle, but Will kept his eyes on Hannibal. Will liked the way he talked, liked the way the words rolled off his tongue, liked the way that he spoke without a second of doubt or hesitation, never a falter in his confidence. If there was one thing that Will knew to he absolutely true about Hannibal Lecter, it was that he was not a man to be shaken.

“Alrigh’...” She mumbled, pressing a hand to her temple, like she was trying to remember what she looked like. “Tall for a lady. Almost as tall as a man - I remember, she used to slouch to hide it. ‘Course, it's not like anyone could tell when she was on her knees. She was a youngin, too. She told me she was nineteen, but she was lyin’. Couldn't have been more than sixteen. Scrawny thing. She had real long, curly blonde hair. She was real pretty, had loads of potential, really. Could've really made something of her life. Such a shame she wound up the way she did.” She mused, somber.

Will felt a pang of sadness for her. A girl, his age (though given Ms. Reynolds age guessing abilities, perhaps a bit older), had disappeared, her only legacy being messy handjobs in back alleys and the fact that she'd vanished on a lonely stretch of road, meeting some unknown fate. For her sake, he hoped she’d escaped, created some new identity and new life for herself. Though the odds of that being the case looked slim at best.

“And the last time you saw her?” Hannibal inquired, leaning forward on his knees, interest piqued. Will’s eyes stayed on Hannibal, watching the way his eyes lit up with fascination and absently wondering if he could lure those eyes his way and have them maintain the look.

“Right here in this apartment. It was winter. Frigid. I begged her not to go out - she was living on the streets, so sometimes she'd stay with me. On cold nights. But she insisted she had to go. Client. Told her to meet him there at midnight.”

“Meet him where?” Will inquired, voice nearly inaudible.

“Edge of Hagley Wood.”

The words sent chills down Will's spine. A place that had once been such a comfort was now full of ghosts, and even the name felt cursed now. Like even uttering its name could damn you to some bloody fate.

“Never saw her again after that. Never came home. Not that I'm surprised. Our sort don't have much in the way of a life expectancy. We never stay in this line of work for long, and not many of us are just retiring.” Maria murmured sullenly before grabbing her bottle and taking another swig.

Will wanted to sit and wallow in the broken feeling, knowing it. The air was choked with the scent of someone sentenced to death. Will instantly understood her, knew the curse of a premature death. He resisted the urge to reach over, do something, anything, to ease the ache.

Before Will had a chance to act, to comfort, to pray for a better life, Hannibal stood abruptly, straightening his tweed jacket as he cleared his throat. Will’s eyes turned toward him, admiring him from below. Determined, yet flippant. Like this very interaction was beneath him. Strange, how he did that, living like he was a god. Will had always felt apart from the world, silently watching from far away. Hannibal, though, stood as though he was above it, staring down upon his subjects.

Will followed him and stood.

“Thank you for your time, you've been very helpful.” Hannibal assured, doing his best to sound genuine, though Will could hear the hint of boredom in his voice. He’d known it since the woman opened her mouth that it was a false lead, and Will knew too. Too young, too blonde. She was far from their Bella. Still, sad how she had vanished the way she did. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

Hannibal led the way out of the flat, Will trailing after, hands tucked into his pockets and head down. He pulled his arms tighter to his body as they slipped out, cold air reaching his cheeks as the sun began to sink beneath the skyline.

“Cold?” Hannibal inquired once they were a block or so away.

“Yeah. Bit warmer where I come from. Still not so fond of the cold yet.” Will confessed, shivering.

“Take my jacket. I hardly need it. It is much colder where I hail from.”

“I don't…” He began, but his voice trailed as the older man's arms wrapped around him, draping the jacket over his shoulders. It was warm, and smelled like him. Sharp, warm, hints of sweetness. It was a smell that Will had began to grow familiar, lingering in his sheets after long nights of discussing the case and everything else that happened to earn their attention. “Thank you.” Will whispered.

“Of course.” He dismissed quickly. “Now, to the issue at hand. The woman that Ms. Reynolds described is most certainly not our Bella.”

“Too young. Too blonde.” Will grumbled. He kicked hard at the pavement as they walked. Three days of work hunting down a lead that led to nowhere. Dead ends.

“Our efforts seem to be in vain.” Hannibal said, his tone lighter than Will had expected it to be.

Will nodded. “Back to the drawing board, then.” He sighed.

“You say that with such… Disappointment.”

“Am I supposed to feel something else?”

“Most certainly, I'd think. Our partnership has lasted mere days. Our *search* has lasted mere days. This is a mystery, William. A puzzle. I hate to be left so unchallenged. A game with no challenge would be the true disappointment.” He explained. “The game has only just begun, dear boy.”

Will’s pace slowed and he sincerely began to wonder if his partner in justice was well and truly a psychopath. A psychopath with a point, but a psychopath nonetheless.

They walked along in silence. The streets, while decidedly busier than in Worcestershire, were still thinning. Will tugged the jacket tighter around his shoulders, holding it so tightly that every breath smelled like him. Like cedar and crackling fire and dark chocolate. Will found himself easing at the scent - even if he was walking alongside a crazy person, the comfort of the scent of him and the comfort of the sound of his voice was enough to soothe him, make him a believer in every word, a devout follower of his gospel.

“Though,” Hannibal murmured as they stepped onto the platform, waiting for their train to come and carry them home. “If you truly feel disappointed, there are certain methods to be used. I find it best to release pent up emotion whenever and however possible.”

Will turned to him with a furrowed brow. “And what might this method be, doctor?” He teased.

“Simple as the vibration of vocal chords.” He smirked. “Screaming. The act is a way of… Verbalizing all of the stress, and anger, and negativity. I have found it to be... quite therapeutic.”

“You want me to… Just start screaming? Like I'm being murdered?”

“Murdered, mugged, mutilated, your choice, really.” He chuckled. “A train headed north is going to come roaring by in approximately three minutes. When it comes through, scream into the noise.”

“People will think I'm off my rocker. Think I'm crazier than they already think I am.”

“And you fear that they may get a closer look at the madness truly lurking within you?”

Will stood silent, staring up at him, unsure of what to say. Perhaps those words carried weight, or perhaps they were meaningless. Though Will sorely doubted the latter, feeling the way that his words cut into him. There had always been something dark and twisted in him, something that he had tried so desperately to hide. And yet, every wall he'd built up was suddenly made of glass, shattered only by the tapping of Hannibal Lecter’s finger.

“Either way, who have you here to impress?” Hannibal inquired, gesturing toward the empty platform. “No one here but me, and I already know precisely what kind of crazy you are, darling Will.”

Will’s eyes met his with some amount of challenge in them, though his stares were just that. Empty threats, knowing that it would be a fight in which he would go down swinging. Hannibal, though, didn't seem to mind the challenge, rather staring back with a small smirk, like a lion being

challenged by the tomcat. So easily defeated, so easily devoured, with just one pounce, one bite. But something told Will that Hannibal Lecter liked to play with his food.

This standoff lasted until the ground beneath them began to quake, the train rattling down the tracks. Without warning, Hannibal thrust out a hand, roughly grabbing Will's and taking it tightly in his hand. Suddenly, any opposition faded into something between confusion and thrill. He squeezed tightly to his hand, savoring in the touch, in the unexpected roughness of his palms.

"With me now. On the count of three." Hannibal whispered, breath hot against his ear, just loud enough for him to hear. Like words whispered between rebel spies in dark alleyways, like words whispered between a man and his mistress. Quiet. Meaningful. Leaving his head light and his stomach fluttering.

"One…" His breath was so hot that it was inexplicable how the goosebumps formed against his skin. "Two…" His hand rested firmly on his lower back, and Will pressed into his touch. "Three." And the train rumbled past, screeching along the rails so loudly that the sound drowned the demons in his head.

And Will screamed. The noise erupted violently from his chest, breaking through the air, blending with the scream of the train rolling past. Everything seeped into the noise, everything tearing free from the crevices of his mind and disappearing into the train. All the pain that he had carried with him all his life. All the fear that plagued him day in and day out. All the double-edged sword that was imagination and empathy, with just a touch of delusion. He expelled his anger and disappointment with life, every night spent trembling with nightmares of hollow eyes and hollow trees. He let go, if only for a moment, of the cloak called death. And for just a moment, he was free.

And then it was gone. The noise, the train, his breath.

"Better?"

Will stared up at him, not wanting to admit a thing. Rather, he slumped against him as the train vanished into the night. It was as if all, good and bad and both and neither, had all been drained of him and now he stood lightheaded and wobbly. As he feared his own collapse, the train home to Worcestershire slowed into the station, doors opening for them to board, which Will gladly did, collapsing immediately into the seat nearest the door.

As the full weight of the fact that he'd hardly slept in days and all of his energy had dissipated into his scream came crashing down, so did he. He didn't care much for norms or society, so perhaps that was why he so ready to lean heavily against him. He smelled like home - real home, not this place. He leaned against him, breathing him in, the slow chugging of the train and the rhythm of his breaths being a lullaby to take him into the black.

"One more reason why I'm glad our case continues on." Hannibal whispered, lips pressed against his curls.

"And what's that?" He mumbled.

"Our partnership has only begun. The idea of it ending so quickly… Now that would be the true tragedy."

Praise the Lord (And Pass the Ammunition)

He was smothering. Choking. Dying.

Suffocating on silk.

In that instant, he was trapped inside the hollow of an old, dead Wych Elm, struggling to claw himself free, struggling to catch his breath. He was clawing at the bark so hard that his fingers were bleeding and raw, the blood dripping down his wrists as his hands trembled violently, unable to climb to freedom. It was dark, so dark, only the light of the moon to prove existence of anything around him, the cold light of the stars proof that he had not slipped into the void. The moonlight was just enough to see his red-stained hands.

All the while, silk was lodged in his throat, cutting off his oxygen. He could feel himself growing dizzy, his stomach feeling empty, his knees going weak. He was going to smother, the smooth fabric suffocating him. He was going to drown, he was going to suffocate, he was going to *die*...

His eyes shot open wide, cold sweat pouring in beads down his forehead. He struggled for breath, yet nothing was coming, lungs on fire as he clawed at his sheets. The ceiling above him, and all the chips in the paint that he'd long memorized, began to fade in and out of focus as the breath fled his lungs. His legs kicked hard on reflex, hands gripping wildly at his throat as he coughed forcefully once, twice…

It landed wet and soiled on his bed, but there was no mistaking it as his eyes came back into focus. Red silk. Taffeta cloth, lying in his lap. Shoved between his lips in the same way that it had been shoved between Bella's. He had woken to the same thing that had killed Bella.

Suddenly, three sharp knocks reverberated through the house.

Will rose to his feet on shaky legs, knees threatening to give out beneath him. Someone was trying to kill him. Someone was angry, furious with him for daring to open his eyes. Someone was going to suffocate him and let him smother beneath the weight of the sins of twisted perception. Someone was angry with Will for unearthing things, seeing things he wished so desperately to unsee. Someone was angry. Someone was watching. Someone was trying to kill him.

And someone was knocking at his door.

Will quickly fell to his knees, rummaging through a pile of dirty clothes that had yet to be washed. He tossed them back, threw them without much thought until he found it. His father's gun, wrapped in a shirt that perhaps had once been white but was now long stained yellow. The smooth metal pressed against his palm comfortingly, though it didn't do him much good when he jumped hard with the rap of three more knocks.

His father was undoubtedly passed out and hungover on the couch, and Will figured that even if by some miracle he did wake up to open the door, he would surely be killed, just to take more from the boy haunted by death. No, better to go down guns blazing. Better to look for himself. He moved slowly down the stairs, gun pointed and held in attention. Prepared to shoot, prepared to kill.

He hesitated, just a moment, before curling his hand tight around the brass knob, yanking it open to find familiar eyes peering up at him from beneath gray skies and his black fedora. One hand held a

cigarette steady between his teeth, the other tugged at his suspenders. He looked up, as though he had expected to find blue eyes but rather finding the barrel of a gun.

“What is it with you and your guns?” He groaned.

Will let out a breath that he had been holding since waking this morning as he lowered his weapon, turning the safety back on and dropping it in the kitchen table, leading the way into the house. At the sight of him, Will’s anxiety began to ease, everything beginning to fade to background noise. Hannibal tended to have that effect on people.

They didn't exactly plan for Hannibal to come over anymore; he just sort of showed up, like they had this unspoken agreement that Will’s home was now headquarters. The handsome stranger lurking at his doorstep at all hours of the day, it was a miracle that the neighbors hadn't began to whisper. He didn't mind it, though. He liked falling asleep to the smell of him ingrained in his sheets, just knowing that he had been there making him feel more secure, though that was probably the opposite of what he should have felt.

Hannibal snuffed out his cigarette before coming in, knowing that, given how much his father drank, the entire house was a fire hazard. He flicked it into the small pile of cigarette butts that had grown there over the days, behind the bushes, where Will had insisted he leave them for lack of an ashtray. He then followed to the kitchen, the threshold seeming to bow to him in the way it would to a master, the floor walked upon like it belonged to him. It was the same way that the entire world seemed to kneel to him. Like he was its ruler.

Will had gotten used to it.

They spent most days together, and the feeling of awe and mystery was beginning to fade away. He was still fascinated and perplexed, eternally watching and observing and learning, but the awestruck, starstruck feeling began to wane and their relationship became like that of friends, peers, rather than student and teacher, or god and subject. With that, Hannibal’s guards began to come down, if only a bit. Will was a man staring through a keyhole into Hannibal Lecter’s mind, struggling to make it wider. Perhaps, one day the door would swing open. And if it did, perhaps Will would slam it shut again.

He wasn't ready to see all of him yet. He probably never would be ready to see all or him. Will knew that much. But he would see as much as he could, even if it drove him mad.

“May I?” Hannibal inquired, pulling an unopened bottle of Coca Cola out of the refrigerator.

Will hesitated. He had spent the day collecting pennies from the sidewalk when he'd hung fliers searching for Bella’s identity, had saved them up to buy the bottle of Coke. They were dirt poor, and what he had, he held onto. But Hannibal always was one for manners… “Mmm… Share it with me?”

“Of course.” He answered with a small smile, twisting off the cap and saving it in his pocket before taking a small sip, leaning against the counter.

He looked like a god of sorts, and not in the way that Will had noticed. Not the fearsome god that acknowledged himself above all others, yet was never rude or cruel about it. He just was. Will had noticed that the first time they had met. Hannibal Lecter roamed the earth like a god, like infinitely more than flesh and blood. And perhaps he was. But Will was beginning to see more of this godlikeness.

This time, he noticed how beautiful he was altogether, as a whole. He was stunning in ways that Will didn't quite see at first. It was an acquired taste, like olives or whiskey. He was not so beautiful at first glance, but it slowly began to come into focus. He had noticed his hands weeks ago, the way that they balanced his cigarette between his fingertips. They were strong hands that drew the younger man's eyes, hands that made him wonder what it would feel like to be touched by them. He noticed his eyes next. His dark eyes were nearly maroon, like Lucifer's himself, yet as mesmerising as Lucifer himself. Then his cheekbones and jawline, both too sharp than they had any right to be. And his voice, the way you could fall into it and drown…

"I suggest we head down to the library. Missing persons reports could be helpful." Hannibal suggested, passing the Coca Cola bottle to him, rattling him from his trance.

"Agreed." Will quickly mumbled, taking a sip. "But I would like to take a look through anything they've got on witchcraft. I've got a funny feeling on it. The hand being buried… it's pretty queer."

Hannibal gave him a small, crooked smile. "Agreed." He nodded, arms crossing lazily across his chest. "It *is* strange. We can look into local cult activity. Perhaps our Bella was involved in something she ought not be. Human sacrifices of sorts."

Will smiled, beaming up at the approval in his voice. Silly, how much he liked the approval, the attention. Hannibal seemed to notice this, giving a quiet chuckle and shoving his hands into his pockets. He leaned forward, taking a step away from the counter. Hannibal inched closer to him, closing the gap between them, until he was close enough to feel the breath on his face. It was almost as though he was intent upon kissing him, stealing his mouth, and perhaps he would let him. But instead, he took the bottle of Coca Cola from between his fingers and raised it to his lips, not breaking eye contact as he took a sip.

"Then we're off." He murmured with a small smirk, pulling away and heading toward the door, not waiting for Will to catch his breath.

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The Hand of Glory is the dried and pickled hand of a man who has been hanged, often specified as being the left (Latin: sinister) hand, or, if the man were hanged for murder, the hand that "did the deed."

Old European beliefs attribute great powers to a Hand of Glory combined with a candle made from fat from the corpse of the same malefactor who died on the gallows. The candle so made, lighted, and placed (as if in a candlestick) in the Hand of Glory, would have rendered motionless all persons to whom it was presented. The process for preparing the hand and the candle are described in 18th century documents, with certain steps disputed due to difficulty in properly translating phrases from that era. The concept inspired short stories and poems in the 19th century.

According to old European beliefs, a candle made of the fat from a malefactor who died on the gallows, lighted, and placed (as if in a candlestick) in the Hand of Glory, which comes from the same man as the fat in the candle, this would render motionless all persons to whom it was presented. The method for holding the candle is sketched in Petit Albert. The candle could be put out only with milk. In another version, the hair of the dead man is used as a wick, and the candle would give light only to the holder. The Hand of Glory also purportedly had the power to unlock any door it came across. The method of making a Hand of Glory is described in Petit Albert, and in the Compendium Maleficarum.
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The 1722 Petit Albert *describes in detail how to make a Hand of Glory, as cited from him by Grillot de Givry:*

"Take the right or left hand of a felon who is hanging from a gibbet beside a highway; wrap it in part of a funeral pall and so wrapped squeeze it well. Then put it into an earthenware vessel with zimat, nitre, salt and long peppers, the whole well powdered. Leave it in this vessel for a fortnight, then take it out and expose it to full sunlight during the dog-days until it becomes quite dry. If the sun is not strong enough put it in an oven with fern and vervain. Next make a kind of candle from the fat of a gibbeted felon, virgin wax, sesame, and ponie, and use the Hand of Glory as a candlestick to hold this candle when lighted, and then those in every place into which you go with this baneful instrument shall remain motionless."

Will had foolishly gotten his hopes up at the sound of it, but had been led down yet another dead end. Bella was no felon, at least not to his knowledge, and burying the hand had nothing to do with the Hand of Glory ritual. Disappointed, Will slammed the book closed, letting out a groan and burying his face in his hands.

"Nothing?" Hannibal whispered across the table.

"'nother dead end." He sighed.

"I can't say that I'm surprised." Hannibal replied. His words were bleak, but he had a certain joy in his voice. Like the game was getting harder and he was more excited to face another challenge. "There are no reports of cult activity surrounding the time of the murder. Though, with all the war reports overtaking the news, I suppose now would be the perfect time to start a cult."

Will let out an exasperated groan, burying his face in the crook of his arm. He knew that investigations took time, but they were no closer than they were when they'd started. All of their leads led down to dead ends. It was beginning to feel as though Bella would never have justice, and her killer would continue living as though she had never died.

Will felt a small tap of glass against his knee. He glanced down to find Hannibal holding out the Coke bottle beneath the table, where they had been passing it back and forth all day to avoid detection. It was mostly empty, save for a tiny bit left at the bottom of the bottle, barely enough for a sip.

"Take the last of it." Hannibal offered softly, drawing a small smile to Will's lips. He glanced around, making sure that the coast was clear before downing the rest of it. It was warm and flat but still felt good against his dry throat as it went down. He sighed heavily, smiling halfheartedly at the older boy.

They had spent the day passing books and bottles, stealing glances and brushes of fingertips. It was ridiculous, the way he felt around Hannibal. It was wrong, and it scared him, and yet he couldn't bring himself to care. Will had never felt attraction like this before. Like there was some tug in the pit of his belly, drawing them closer until Will could hardly stand it anymore. It was so much more than desire, or lust. It was… Conjoinment.

But still. He could never love another man. It was wrong, so wrong, on so many levels. Boys loved girls and girls loved boys and there was nothing else to be allowed. Will could never love a boy, even if he wanted to. Because life wasn't about love. It was about sticking to the status quo. It was about getting married and having babies and working a nine-to-five, or marching off to war. There was no room for love, and there was no room for attraction to things he ought not touch.

“I think we’ve had enough today.” Hannibal murmured, seeming to notice the faraway stare that Will had in his eyes. The older boy pulled the book away, returning it to the pile at the end of the desk. He rose from his chair before holding out a hand, which Will took after only a moment’s hesitation. “Let's go home.”

It was near curfew anyways. Will rose from his seat, following Hannibal out into the cobblestone streets, heading toward home. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets, picking at the loose strings for fear of reaching out a hand if he didn't distract himself. He wanted to hold his hand, liked the way his hands felt against his skin, but he forced himself back. Silly, whatever this was. Silly. Dangerous.

“It'll be alright, *mažai detektyvas.* You will find what you are looking for.” Hannibal assured, sensing Will's unease, though not quite catching what he was uneasy about. Or maybe he knew, but neglected to mention it for sake of his feelings.

“Mmm.” Will grunted, staring at his shoes as they walked. Disappointment and angst, that was all life seemed to be anymore. And fear. Fear of what lurked in the shadows of his own mind. Fear of the killer that was so obviously hunting him. Fear, constant fear, fear of death. Fear of the only thing he truly knew.

The tune began to play in his head for the first time in a long time. He'd only heard it before moving here, always heard it sang through the streets late at night. Army boys, drunk, remembering battle and singing of its glories rather than cowering in its horrors.

“Down went the gunner, a bullet was his fate / Down went the gunner, and then the gunner's mate / Up jumped the sky pilot, gave the boys a look / And manned the gun himself as he laid aside the book, shouting / Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition / Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition / Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition / And we'll all stay free!” Will hummed to himself, mumbling the words from time to time. They came back to him like ghosts drawn from the back of his mind, things he'd rather forget.

“War tunes. I've not heard that one before.” Hannibal confessed quietly. “I never much cared for war songs. I prefer classical. Mozart. Beethoven.”

“It reminds me of home. That song.” Will explained quietly.

“Home… And why is that? Why would a song of guns and war remind you of home?” Hannibal inquired.

“Used to hear boys singing it when they went off the war. My friends, only two I had, sang it when they got drafted. Proud to be serving their country and all that patriotic shit.” Will muttered disdainfully, angry at the place he called home for sending innocent men off to fight and die in battles they didn't start. “They never came home after that.”

Hannibal gave him a look of sorrow. Not pity, exactly, but a shared heartache for those lost, innocent victims to a war no one deserved to be fighting. War was always so glorified, so beautiful, so righteous from far away. The lights of gunfire and burning cities were stunning from a distance, but the moment they came too close, there was nothing they wouldn't give for a little peace.

“And where might home be? You've never said.” Hannibal inquired softly after a moment of silence.

Will furrowed his brow. He supposed he hadn't talked about where he came from. It was odd, and Will always assumed that Hannibal was forever one step ahead, always knew every little thing about him. He always just knew, knew everything that there was to know, adding to the illusion that he was somehow more than mortal. But now, his facade was beginning to crumble, let the fact that he was nothing more than a human show through the cracks. “Louisiana. Just outside of New Orleans.”

“I should have known.” Hannibal chuckled. “The accent is quite distinct.”

Will gave a halfhearted smile. He had hardly spoke of Louisiana since coming here, hadn't had the heart to verbalize just how much he missed his home. But there was no point in hiding from Hannibal, nor did he have the desire to. Talking to him was easy, opening up to him as natural as breathing.

“Tell me about Louisiana. Tell me about your life before the war.” Hannibal suggested.

“Warmer. Bluer skies.” He chuckled bitterly. If there was one thing that he missed, it was the blue skies. He hated the clouds. He hated the rain. He missed looking up and seeing blue.

“Well, beyond the weather.” Hannibal chuckled.

“Mm… I mean, I grew up there. Mom died when I was young. Dad’s an alcoholic. He tries, but after losing my mom, he drinks to forget and… Well, that was most of my childhood. Taking his fits of rage and taking care of him the morning after. Repeat. That was life in Louisiana. Not much has changed, but the atmosphere here is different. It's more… Bleak.” Will mused solemnly, slowly, not much caring to relive much of anything. There was nothing good for him to relive.

“I knew that. I want to know more, Will. Tell me something I've never heard. Tell me about the good. Surely there is some good?” Hannibal insisted quietly. “I want to know you beyond pain, and rage, and righteous indignation.”

Will paused a moment, then smiled.

“Winston.” He said firmly.

“Winston?”

“Winston. My dog. Died a little before we moved here. But I had him for years. Loved him. Big, mangy mutt, dad found him off the side of the road and brought him home for me, a little after mom died. He was… I mean, you know me. I don't exactly have a lot of friends. So Winston, Winston was my best friend. I loved him.” He mused.

Hannibal offered him a smile. There was no edge, no smirk, nothing to indicate that he knew more than he was letting on, nothing to indicate that he was anything more than human. “Tell me more.”

“We used to go down to the stream near my house. Just me and Winston and the quiet of the stream. Used to go fishing. Dad went through a spell where he didn't really work, and money was tight, so I fished. Caught my own food. Did okay for myself. And everyday out of the house, in the water… It was a good time. The water taking me in deeper, Winston on the banks, fishing rod in hand...” He reminisced. “Probably some of the best memories I've ever had, down in that stream.”

Hannibal smiled, shoulders bumping as they headed toward home, walking slowly. They never walked too fast on the way back, never really wanting to let the night end, never wanting to say farewell, if even for the night. It took everything within him not to reach out, take his hand and hold him close. He inhaled sharply, tugging harder at the strings in his pockets.

“What about you?” Will inquired after a moment. “Where are you from?”

“Lithuania.” Hannibal replied quietly.

“Lithuania.” Will repeated. He vaguely recognized the name, but knew little more. “Tell me more.”

“It's cold.” The older boy teased.

“More than the weather. Tell me about life there. Tell me your story.”

Will knew it was a stretch, and feared that he may recede, pull away and refuse to let him in, but he was rather met with a small smile. Friendly, kind. Will stared up at him with big eyes, smiling softly with hopes of knowing him better now. There were so many things that Will wanted to know, so many mysteries he wanted to unearth. This was where he could start.

“I was born into wealth. My parents, my younger sister Mischa, and me. We lived in Lithuania until the political tensions began to rise in Germany. When war looked to be on the horizon, we fled. It kept us safe for awhile, living in a cabin on the outskirts of the country. But…” He got this look in eyes, a look of untold, unspoken horror.

“You don't have to finish. If you don't want to, you don't have to.” Will assured, tugging harder at the string in his pocket, twisting it tight around his finger as it cut off the blood flow to his fingertip. He knew what was coming next. His family had found its way into harm’s way, and the war had claimed all but him. That was the way most stories went these days.

“No, no. I… I want you to know this. They were killed. My family. My parents first. Then, Mischa and I were held by looters. Scum. She was young. Too young. And… They killed her, took her from me. And…” He paused for a long moment. “I escaped. She did not. Since then, I've sold some of my family's estate and lived abroad. France, Italy, now here.”

It broke.

The string in his pocket snapped and Will let go, tugging his hand out and curling it around Hannibal’s, their fingers laced tightly. The older man glanced between them at their locked fingers before catching Will's eyes, staring in disbelief for a moment. Will froze, fearing that he had done something wrong, that all of these feelings were in his head. But then Hannibal gave his hand a reassuring squeeze and kept walking, the two of them hand in hand.

“I'm sorry. About your sister.” Will murmured.

“Don't worry. One day, I will track down the men that killed my family. And I'll kill them.”

Will didn't reply. Oh, what a broken man he was. Sad and broken, using death as his weapon as though she is his to wield. Will could hardly imagine the hurt, the anguish of losing someone so close to him. Death couldn't hurt you if you didn't let anyone in, and while she had taken those who had gotten closest, he'd never felt the sting of losing someone too close. Not like Hannibal. He'd never had a Mischa to lose.

“Tell me something happy. From your childhood.” Will whispered, leaning on Hannibal’s shoulder. “Surely there's some good.”

“Oh, my sweet Will… I would tell you all the happy stories left in me, show you everything that's good left in me. But the sun is setting and you are home, my dear boy.”

And so it seemed, his home casting shadows over them. It was dark, and gloomy, and Will probably had a passed out father to deal with. How he would much prefer to keep walking alongside him, listen to tales of the great Hannibal Lecter’s childhood, but it was time to go inside. Time to say farewell.

“Goodnight, *mažai detektyvas.”* Hannibal bade quietly, finally releasing his hand and ushering him inside.

“Goodnight, Hannibal.”

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It wasn't until Will was safely in his bedroom that he remembered the morning’s events. The silk down his throat, threatening to smother him. The silk that he had forced from his mouth and threw onto the bed before grabbing for his gun.

It wasn't until Will was safely in his bedroom that he realized it was gone.

It wasn't until Will was alone that he began to wonder if he was going crazy.

Still, he forced himself into bed, crawled under the sheets, some part of him still fearing for his life. Still, as the rain broke loose from the sky and began to beat against the roof, his eyes drifted closed and he found himself drifting into dreamless sleep, black waves taking him out to sea with each tick of the clock.

He woke again under the dark sky. The rain was still pouring and beating down on his head. His clothes were stained with mud, his hands bloody. He was no longer wrapped in his blankets, listening to the rain pour outside his window. Instead, he was standing in a hole, covered in mud, cold and shivering and bleeding.

His sight was obscured by the dark and the dirt, but as his eyes adjusted, he vaguely began to recognize where he stood. Hagley Cemetery - once, it had been a regular to bury your dead, but it had become something of a final resting place for the nameless souls, casualties of war who had never been identified. Rows upon rows of gravestones, as far as he could see, which, coincidentally, wasn't very far. He stood below the earth, standing in a half-dug grave. His eyes found the gravestone in the grave where he stood, the marking simply saying “Bella.”

This must have been where they buried her. Some makeshift funeral for a girl lost not to the war, but to humanity's own depravity. This must have been where they laid her to uneasy rest. And Will had made his way here to unearth her yet again.

Will’s chest began to heave. A shovel stood shoved in the earth in front of him. The rain beat down around him. He had no recollection of coming here, had no memory of the walk. His hands trembled as he frantically grasped at the grass above him, forcing himself out of the hole that he had dug for himself. He was hyperventilating, shaking so hard that he feared his heart may give out.
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But as soon as he reached solid ground, he ran. Ran as fast as his legs could carry him, ran blindly through the night, through the rain, through thunder and lightning, until everything went black around him.

He woke again the next morning, not quite remembering crawling into bed. But he was, wrapped in his blanket, in his night clothes, just as he had gone to bed. The memories of the graveyard seemed distant now. He began to wonder if he was going mad, if the nightmares were that of a madman’s. He wondered if that was what he was now. A madman.

It wasn't until he saw the dirt and blood caked on his hands that he knew he was.

Roads Less Traveled

The newspaper slammed down in front of him, dropping heavily onto the wooden table, startling Will from the pages of his own - The Chronicle, dated November 23rd, 1941, roughly around the time that Bella would have gone missing. He had flipped through every newspaper from October 1st, 1941 to November 23rd, and he was intent on finding something. Anything. Will glanced up at Hannibal, standing over him with a grin.

They had spent the past four days in the library, though to little avail, not finding much in the way of anything. Will found himself closing off to the older boy, and everyone around him. The nightmares, the sleepwalking, waking up standing in front of the door, or just outside the house, or leaning out the window. He'd not made it all the way out, but each morning, he knew that he was getting closer. Closer and closer and closer…

Hannibal dropped the newspaper with a proud, triumphant smirk on his face. Will stared up at him for a moment before picking up the paper. Nothing different, just some old war news…

“The bottom. Here.” Hannibal pointed toward a small article at the bottom of the page, something Will would've quickly glanced over and forgotten on his own.

Jack Mossop, 43, was found sleepwalking along Hagley Road on January 3rd, quietly muttering about “the girl in the tree”.

Mossop was committed to the Hanwell Asylum in Wales three days later, and was later revealed to have been affiliated with the Nazi party. Mossop worked in munitions, and was revealed to have been selling information to the Nazi party until he abruptly quit his job in November, 1941.

Last week, March 16th, 1942, Mossop was found stabbed to death by a fellow patient.

Will’s breath caught in his throat. It felt as though he was reading about himself. A madman, driven mad by the girl in the tree. His eyes scanned across the first line over and over. Eternally sleepwalking down Hagley road, the girl in the tree forever on his tongue, her empty eyes staring up at him. Staring through him.

“The girl in the tree.” Will whispered aloud before returning his gaze to Hannibal, hope returning to them. “You think he killed her?”

“Kill her? I'm not sure. Though I'm nearly certain that he knew something about dear Bella’s murder.” Hannibal replied. “The timeline fits, and the similarities *are* quite eerie.”

Will admired the crooked grin on his face. He normally had this ever-present smirk, and this was close, but not quite. It was giddier, a bit more gleeful, a bit more excited. He was stunning in his joy, even more so than he was cloaked in that shroud of mystery that he so often wore. In his joy, in the light of day, he was beautiful, and Will couldn't help but notice it above all else.

But as what the older man had just said began to register, Will smiled brightly for a moment - a proper lead! But his glee only lasted a moment before dissipating, realizing that, in truth, it was little more than a dead end. Jack Mossop was dead. There was no information to be gained. He was getting quite sick of these hopeful leads leading to nowhere but disappointment. Never anything to be found, never anything to be gained.

“Doesn't matter. He's dead, and whatever information he had died with him.” Will sighed, defeated.

“Or did it?” Hannibal smirked. His eyes narrowed, holding hard contact as he leaned forward across the desk. “Turn the page.”

With a furrowed brow, Will obeyed, flipping to the next page, where the article continued on.

“Jack saw some stuff he ought not have seen. Met with people he ought not have met with.” Mossop’s cousin and only living relative, Una Mossop, 64, disclosed in an interview. “He saw something a few months back that really shook him up. Drove him mad, demons like that. But he wasn't a bad man. Just did bad things.”

“Una Mossop.” Will breathed. “She knows what he was doing.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Hannibal said with a smile. He looked proud, whether it be of Will or himself he wasn’t sure. “By the sounds of it, Mr. Mossop didn’t have anyone left to confide in. Perhaps our Una knows something that we don’t. She doesn't live far from here. We could go pay her a visit, be home by sundown.” Hannibal suggested with a small grin, rocking on the balls of his feet, fingernails scratching lightly at the wood.

Will stood up, snapping the newspaper and folding it quickly. He met Hannibal’s eyes, holding the eye contact - something that he rarely did with anyone but Hannibal - and he gave a crooked smile, leaning forward, leaning closer. So close that he could feel the breath on his face, so close he could nearly taste him. So close he could have kissed him. So close that he almost wanted to.

But he didn’t. Instead, he stared at him with wide eyed determination and something like excitement. Well and true and giddy excitement. There was a certain zeal in him now, something giddy, ready to get down to business. It was a puzzle and Will was ready to put the pieces together. The game, the game was afoot.

“Let's do this.”

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“You boys look awful young to be sticking your noses into things like this.” Una commented, pouring a cup of tea, one for each of them. Will smiled, taking the cup from her and taking a sip. “You sure you should be here?”

“Yes, ma’am. We just want to ask you a few questions about your cousin, Jack Mossop? We think that he may have been connected to the murder of an unidentified woman that was found last year. We were hoping you could give us any information that you might have. Anything he might have told you.” Hannibal inquired.

Una stared at him a moment, a sort of sorry, vacant look in her eye. Will knew what she was thinking, knew that look well. The same look Brian and Jimmy’s moms had had the days of their funerals. The same look Hannibal had when he talked about Mischa. The same look he got whenever he thought about Winston. It was a look of sadness, and mourning. Una had lost the only family she had left, the war taking everyone and everything in one way or another.

“Jack… He wasn't the monster people like to say he was. He just needed the money. Didn't pay him good, and… He did bad, but he wasn't bad himself.” Una defended, fiercely loyal to her family.
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Will offered a sad smile. He felt much in the same toward his father. A good man who did evil deeds.

“Of course. We were just curious… In an article you did an interview for, you mentioned that Mr. Mossop saw *something* that drove him mad. I just… We were wondering whether or not you would be willing to elaborate. See, my young colleague, a year ago, unearthed the body of a girl stuffed in a tree. The case has since gone cold, but William and I have been… We've been searching for her killer. And we think Jack may have known something.”

Una fell silent, staring blankly for a moment, as if trying to process how these two boys had stumbled upon their doorstep. How she had fallen into their path, into their mess. Will chewed on his lip, praying for an answer, praying for a resolution to this mess, an answer in this puzzle. Praying that she would open her mouth and speak.

“Jack witnessed a murder. Didn't participate, but he saw it. Helped get rid of the body. What else was he gonna do? He woulda been next if he'd done anything else.” Una finally explained. “It was a mistake. It was all just a mistake. And… It haunted the poor man til the day he died. He never was right after that.”

She let out a small sniffle, as though trying to hold back tears. Will shifted forward slightly, leaning across the gap between them and resting a hand on her knee in hopes of comforting her. It didn't come so easily, touch, comfort, but he tried. Despite what Hannibal said about him being so full of pain and rage and righteous indignation, Will had a softer side of him. Something good and kind and empathetic in him.

“He worked in the munitions factory. Hated it. Bad place to work. Bad conditions, bad pay, but it was all he could get. So… He started selling information. I hated it, hated it, but… It paid the bills. We woulda starved otherwise. He took care of me, we were all that… We were all that we had. Either one of us. He did it for me. It wasn’t…” Una justified, protected, tears welling in her eyes. Will knew that she blamed herself for what had happened.

“It wasn't your fault.” Will assured.

“I know, I know, I... He went drinking with… A Nazi bloke he was doing business with. Van Ralt, he said. Van Ralt and the Dutch Woman. They went drinking, and Jack said the night went okay until… Until they got into the car. They got into a row, Van Ralt and the Dutch Woman. Jackie used to talk about it in his sleep, begging them to stop yelling. Begging Van Ralt to… to stop choking her. To let her go.” Her lip was quivering as she spoke, as though she had been there herself.

Will felt sorrow for her, felt some deep pain in his chest at the image of it. Strangled by a man without morals, the life taken from him as he struggled. He could practically feel the fingers curling around his throat, calloused skin digging into his neck, forcing the breath from his lungs as he kicked and flailed, begging for mercy, for freedom. Will pulled his hand away from Una, as if the very touch of her burned his skin.

“He couldn't save her. Was too afraid to try. Jack was a good man, but he was a coward. Always cared to save his own ass first. It… He was too afraid to stand up for the right thing. To stand up to that Nazi son of a bitch. To save that girl. He was afraid, so he helped get rid of the body. Never the same after that. Nightmares, sleepwalking, woulda thought he'd been to war himself.” She explained remorsefully.

Will frowned as he sipped at his tea , eyes trained on the old woman. Even knowing what kind of woman Bella might've been, it didn't make him feel any better about her demise. A sinner damned to hell, but even she didn't deserve this fate. He gulped down hard, shifting uncomfortably at her tale. The tale of a cold-hearted killer, a traitorous coward, and a dead girl.

“Jack said that they drove to the edge of a forest and took her in as far as they could manage. Put her in a tree, hid her in the branches. The nightmares started, and they were always the same. He was always lost in the forest, and the eyes watched him from the tree. Glowing eyes, *angry* eyes. It haunted him like the devil. I'd never seen anyone regret anything so much. Never seen anybody so… so afraid of their ghosts. No one deserves that.”

He did. Will bit his lip to keep his words trapped behind them, but perhaps such cowardice was worthy of the ghosts that followed after.

“Then the sleepwalking, and the terrors. He stopped sleeping at one point to avoid the girl in the tree. Had no other choice but to admit him. Sold his things to keep from starving, I knew he wasn't coming home.” She mumbled before blowing her nose. “I'm sorry, boys, it's just hard to talk about, is all.”

Will’s nails tapped against the teacup as he turned to Hannibal, who was staring with rapt attention, so truly captivated by her tale that he wondered if he was even truly there anymore. His dark eyes were alight with intrigue, like they were on the verge of something truly great, on the cusp of something truly profound. Will wondered what was ticking behind those eyes, what made them light up like that.

Will, though hardly felt so joyous. What excitement had filled him earlier had dissipated, returning to a shallow feeling. It wasn't the game that Hannibal insisted it was. This was a matter of justice, a matter of a dead woman stuffed silent in her grave. This was a tale of a girl strangled, a man driven mad, and a Nazi who had gotten away with it. Even if the puzzle was solved, what good did it do? It brought no one back, it brought no peace. The only solace that he could take in it was that Bella would have a name. Her killer wouldn't have a cage, her bones couldn't rest in peace. There would be no justice.

“Do you happen to know where he happened to be when this all occurred? Where he helped hide the body?” Hannibal queried, leaning forward on his knees. “It didn't happen to be Hagley Wood, did it?”

“Hagley? Heavens, no. Jack was away on business when it all happened. He was somewhere in Germany. The Dutch Woman never set foot in Worcestershire.”

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Will was screaming. Shouting and raving like a madman as he kicked furiously at the trunk of a tree off the side of the road that led home. Not only was the chase still on, it meant that there was another girl out there who had been murdered and tossed aside like garbage. He kicked, and screamed, threw punches at nothing, flailing like a crazy person. How mad he must have looked, how crazy, how insane. If anyone saw him, maybe he'd meet the same fate as poor, cowardly, traitorous Jack Mossop. Lying stabbed to death and bloody in an asylum.

“DEAD!” Will screamed, the noise echoing through the lonely twilight air. “ALL DEAD!”

“Will...” Hannibal said, voice somewhere between compassionate and stern.
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Will turned to him, eyes full of fire, all the disposition of a rabid animal. He was blinded by emotion - rage, bitterness, heartache. It was blinding, burning, like fire and lightning and thunder pulsing through his veins. His pain and his rage created a beast out of him, furious and ready to attack, though what, he wasn't quite certain.

But as his eyes met Hannibal's, he became human again. His chest was heaving and his hands were trembling and his vision was blurred, but he was human again, all the emotion muffled. Like the very sight of him could calm him down, if only a bit.

"We go searching, try and hunt down a dead girl's killer, and we just keep finding more. More and more dead girls. We're never gonna be able to save them, or stop their killers. There's just dead girl piled on dead girl and we're doing *nothing."* He whimpered, emotion bubbling in his voice. Anger. Frustration. Sadness. Mourning like he had never known.

"People die every day, Will. The best that we can do is offer them justice. Let them rest easy in their graves. That's what you and I are attempting to do here, is it not?"

Hannibal took a step closer, and Will took a step back, pulling away from him, fearing what lurked in him. What could break loose at any given moment, what he could do. Lately, he wasn't quite sure *what* he was capable of, and it frightened him. It felt like the core of him was splintering, and he kept away, afraid of who could be caught in his crossfire.

"But what does it matter?" He shouted, backed against the tree. "We aren't saving anybody. And we're trying to give Bella justice, but what about the others? What about Bella the prostitute, or the Dutch Woman? We can't help them all!" He was crying now. "We can't save any of them."

Hannibal stared at him with a look of pity, like a wounded animal, broken and pathetic. Will's lip quivered under the weight of his stare, entire body shaking as his knees threatened to give out beneath him. He stared up at him with bleary eyes. He'd never felt so pathetic, so useless in his life. So many lives were being taken, and as desperately as he tried to steal their souls back from his old friend Death, he could do nothing. Nothing but grasp at smoke and watch as Death took her victims.

He turned away from the older boy, hands pushed against the tree, the bark pressing into his palms. He kicked, letting out a shout as he forced all his frustration out of him. All his frustration and pain and fury. His foot slammed against the tree until it threatened to break his toes, until his screams were of no longer those of rage, but of pain. Until ragged sobs were being drawn from his throat, and hot tears were streaming down his face. Until Hannibal's arms were wrapped around him, dragging him back, kicking and screaming.

He kicked and screamed like a child throwing a tantrum as Hannibal restrained him, arms pinned down and held back from the tree, no longer allowed to hurt himself, no matter how much he wanted to. The burn and crack of his bones felt like exactly what he deserved, punishment for not being able to save them, to give them the justice that they deserved. He needed the pain, needed the blood of offset the pain of his mourning for girls he never knew.

"Will, calm down, calm down." Hannibal persisted, practically begging as he held him tight against his chest, holding him close. Will struggled against him, but Hannibal was bigger, stronger. Desperate, Will wriggled in his grasp until he was facing toward him, forehead pressed into his chest and fists beating hard against his torso, though Hannibal hardly seemed fazed, making him feel that much weaker.

Still, he hit and he punched until his fists were sore and everything in him was too tired to keep fighting. He fought until he couldn't, until he collapsed in his arms, sobbing into his chest, holding as tightly to him as he possibly could. Hannibal held him close, cradling him tightly in his arms, fingers brushing through his dark curls, rocking him gently as they stood off the side of the road less traveled.

“It's not over. It's not over, *mažai detektyvas.* You will find what you're looking for.” Hannibal vowed quietly, brushing through his hair.

How much had changed since that night when they first met. This terrifying stranger, a man he thought to be the devil, now cradling him in his arms. A man that he had once thought to be a god was now so utterly and undeniably human. The man that he had once thought to be so terrifying was now everything that he cherished and everything that he loved.

Will slowly pulled out of him, eyes finding Hannibal’s. He had old eyes, wise eyes, eyes that had seen so much more than they ever should have. Will had only seen glimpses through the cracks of all that he had been through, and there was so much that he would never know. Will wondered if he had ever gotten to be a child at all, if either of them had gotten some sort of happiness before, or if their friendship was all the happiness that either of them had now.

Happiness. He had never known that word.

Not really, not truly. He'd seen glimpses of it, in the rushing of water around him, in the pages of his books, in Winston the dog and the whistling of the wind. But the happiness of just being, that was something he had never known. The happiness of being near another person, the happiness of knowing that there's someone who wants you around… Will had never known true friendship; the friendship that could speak about anything without fear of judgement, the friendship that wasn't afraid to hold on, the friendship that never let go… He had never known that before Hannibal.

And suddenly, his lips were so close and his eyes had captured Will’s and he was drowning in cedar and wine and crackling fire. His fingers were curled tight around the older man’s jacket, and he felt so small, so fragile, so *safe.* His eyes glanced down at his lips once, twice, and standing so close to him, he could have kissed him. And he wanted to. Oh, he wanted to, wanted to pull him ever closer until they fell into one another and became one. One mind and one soul and one body.

But whatever was left of his sanity screamed to pull away. Pull back, retreat, before someone saw, before someone screamed ‘faggot’, before he did something he couldn't take back. He knew that if he stayed there for one more second, stayed intoxicated by the smell of him, stayed hypnotized by the intensity of his gaze, he would be a goner, and there would never be any coming back.

But before he could take a step back, before he could pull away, Hannibal pulled him closer. One hand curled around the base of his neck, and the older boy claimed his lips, holding him tightly to him.

Will didn't protest, didn't fight, rather melted into him. On the losing side of a temptation he'd so desperately fought against, he pushed against him, chasing his kiss. His fingers grasped tighter at his clothes, trying to pull him as close as he possibly could. There was no war and there was no world and there was no girl in the tree. For just a moment, all that was left was Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter.

His body was warm, even in the cold night air. The younger boy fell against him, fell into him, breathless as the older man pushed him against the tree, deepening the kiss. Bark prickled against

his neck and Hannibal was swallowing him whole, and all was right in the world, even as it crashed and burned around him. All he wanted, here in front of him.

His lips tasted like smoke and wine, the taste lingering in the back of his throat. Hannibal's fingers pushed back through Will's curls, pulling tightly at them, tugging hard. His head pulled back, and for a moment, Will wondered if Hannibal would bare his throat, press his teeth through the skin and drain him of blood. Will wondered if he would let him.

But he just kept kissing, and Will stopped facing his own mortality, rather clinging to the older boy with all his might. His legs began to struggle for holding, wishing for a place to leap up on him and hold him there, the two of them as close to intertwined as they could get. He pulled closer, closer, ever closer, until he couldn't breathe, until his lungs were burning. Will Graham was in too deep now, and there was no coming back.

"Will." Hannibal breathed, breathing his name between kisses. The older boy grasped at his hips, hanging onto him for dear life, exploring his body over his clothes. Will stole another kiss, only a moment, and pulled back, again and again until they both were panting.

Will felt himself hardening in his slacks, and could feel Hannibal's length pressing against him. Lust and need and desire struck him harder than it ever has, and suddenly, sin was some foreign concept. There was no way that this, something so beautiful, something so profound, could possibly be wrong. He knew that come morning, he wouldn't feel the same. He would be ashamed of what he had done, terrified that all of this would damn him to hell. So he held on tighter, held on until morning light, held on until he couldn't hold on any longer.

"Don't stop." Will moaned, voice quiet and breathy as he pressed himself against Hannibal's thigh, making his arousal evident. He needed it to happen, whatever it was, before it was too late. He needed every inch of Hannibal Lecter. Every single inch.

"Will…" He whispered, pulling away from his lips and pressing his forehead into the crook of his neck, holding him close. It would have been so easy to keep going, hidden beneath the shroud of shadows and moonlight, the sun having set and leaving them entombed in the dark of night. It was past curfew now, and no one was coming down this beaten little path until morning. It would have been so easy, but Hannibal stood still. So still, just holding him, breathing him in.

"Please." Will whimpered. He wanted it, wanted him, and feared that morning would break and everything would be ruined. Will would fear his own sins, and everything would crumble. The only true friendship that he had ever had would be ruined. He needed the night to last for eternity, but Hannibal just stayed still.

"We should go home." Hannibal murmured.

Will could've cried out in pain as he pulled away, the cold stinging his skin. He wanted nothing more than to sink back into Hannibal's protective warmth, spend the rest of eternity locked in his arms. But Hannibal stood a few feet away, face in his hands and back turned to him. Like he was trying to process the consequence of what they had just done, like he was repenting for his sins.

Tears began to form in Will's eyes. This was all he had, standing right in front of him. There was nothing else for him. What had life been before Hannibal Lecter? Going through the motions, everyday the same shade of gray. And suddenly, the world was alight with colors, each day new and brilliant when he was standing at his side. Part of him that he could never get too close, that it

was dark inside, but even darkness was better than the monotony of gray. Gray and gray and gray. But now, the world was alight with every color. With every emotion.

But he had thrown it away by getting too close. By letting this happen, no matter how much he had wanted it. Would it not have been better to quietly want for more than to throw everything away on a whim?

“Let's go home.” Hannibal whispered, reaching out a hand behind him for Will to take. He did, fingers slipping into his. The older boy didn't dare look at him, keeping his eyes trained at the ground as they walked home. They didn't look at each other, didn't speak, rather just holding hands and walking the beaten path.

“Goodnight, William.” Hannibal whispered as they stepped into the shadow of his home. It was strange, hearing his name like that. Every night, it was the same thing. *“Goodnight, mažai detektyvas.”* He didn't know what it meant, but he always took comfort in it. Now, though, he spoke his name.

“Goodnight, Hannibal.” Will murmured, finally glancing up at him with glistening blue eyes, shimmering with tears. He wondered if this was goodbye, if he would ever come around again after this, if they could ever be friends again after this.

Then something miraculous happened.

Hannibal leaned forward and pulled him close again, the warmth of him engulfing Will. His lips brushed over the younger man’s, gently, softly, as though he was kissing a ghost. Will’s hands curled around the base of Hannibal’s neck, holding him closer, hoping to deepen the kiss, hoping for more as he chased after him. It wasn't so full of passionate desperation, but rather calm, quiet need. A need to be close, a need to be with.

“Goodnight, *mažai detektyvas.”* Hannibal breathed before turning away and heading away, disappearing off into the night.

It wasn't over.

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He registered the pain in his fingertips first.

Burning, stinging, sharp pain in his fingertips. He let out a hiss of pain, raising them to his eyes to inspect the damage, though he found his eyes quite useless. It was dark and darker, his eyes only able to make out shadows. Vague movements around him, but nothing distinguishable, stumbling like a blind man as he hissed in pain.

He registered the rain next.

Wet and cold, soaked through his clothes as he began to shiver. He was cold and dripping, water burning in his eyes, the wind blowing cold and harsh around him. Thunder rumbled somewhere in
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the distance as he curled in on himself, cursing himself for letting this happen, damning himself to a life of insanity. *Not again, not again, not again.*

He was insane. He was going insane. He glanced around, searching for some marker to show where he had ended up. There were no gravestones, so he supposed that was a good sign. He saw what looked to be shadows of trees whipping violently in the wind. He glanced behind him to see a field, empty save for that eternal work of stone, the Obelisk that had stood from the beginning of time. He couldn't make out anything more than a shadow, but still, he knew it well enough to recognize it immediately.

He was standing at the edge of Hagley Wood.

His chest began to heave as he blinked, once, twice, eyes refusing to adjust to the inky blackness. It was as if he was drowning in it, suffocating on the dark. He struggled for breath as he took a step back, the ground soft and muddy beneath his bare feet. He was going mad, positively insane, any bit of his sanity slowly slipping out from between his fingers, no matter how desperately he tried to grasp for it, no matter how hard he tried to hold on.

Lightning cracked, splitting bright across the sky. Will looked down at his hands, the pain growing worse with each passing second. The light from the sky revealed the source of his pain. The rain was washing away blood, but his hands were still stained red. The scratches and cuts that had been healing from the graveyard had been reopened, but most of the blood came from another place.

His fingernails were splintered and broken and bleeding. He'd been clawing like an animal, though at what and what for, he wasn't sure. His hands shook as he stared at the blood pooling in his nail beds, bright red and staining against pale flesh. He pressed his hands against his chest, holding them tight against him, cradling them in some futile attempt to stop the bleeding, stop the pain.

The light from the sky faded back into darkness, and he found himself even more blind than he had been before. The darkness swallowed him up like the ocean, dragging him under, deeper and deeper and deeper, until he was drowning in it. His only savior was the thunder cracking so loudly that it rattled the earth beneath his feet. A moment later, lightning split across the sky again, violent and loud and heroic, saving him from the depths of darkness.

The light only lasted long enough for him to find what he had done, what had caused his fingers to split and bleed. Blood marked the tree in front of him, bright red against the wood. One sentence was scratched roughly into the bark, just barely legible, written by the scraping of fingers, left red in his blood.

WHO PUT BELLA DOWN THE WYCH ELM?

WHO PUT
BELLA
IN THE
WITCH
ELM

Sex and Cigarettes

Hannibal didn't come around the next day, or the day after that, or the day after that.

It was agonizing, waiting for him to come around again. He feared that he may never return, that their feelings for each other were dangerous, and wrong, and were going to send them both to hell. Those were thoughts and fears that plagued Will day and night. It was sin, homosexuality, and it could land them both in jail for sodomy if they got caught. Besides, it only solidified the idea that he was going mad. No man in his right mind could possibly love another man in the way that he was meant to love a woman, could he?

He spent the first day waiting by the window, staring out onto the street, waiting for him to arrive. Knock on the door, flick his cigarette into the bushes, come in and lead him upstairs, claiming his lips and claiming him as his own. He spent the whole day waiting, and hoping, and praying to unforgiving gods. But he never arrived. He supposed it for the better. His hands had remained bloody and scabbed. Better to let himself heal, or else Hannibal would worry about him. It was for the best. He told himself that… But never really believed it.

He spent the second day in a haze of panic. Fearing the worst, fearing that he would never come around again. He felt this ever-present ache in his chest, fearing that he wouldn't want him anymore. Fearing that he had come to his senses and abandoned the idea that they could be together, or happy. He found himself curled in bed and desperate to catch a whiff of him left ingrained in his sheets. Pathetic, really.

It was the third day that he had decided that it was wrong. That he needed to stay away from Hannibal Lecter, no matter how much it pained him to do so. As much as he mourned his loss, he told himself that it was all for the best. He told himself that it wasn't worth the risk, that it would fade and he would return to the original plan of going home and dying on the battlefield the moment he turned eighteen. It was foolish to believe that he could ever have anything else.

But it didn't matter how determined he was to push Hannibal away from him, because the moment that his eyes read his name in Hannibal’s handwriting on that fateful fourth day, his foolish heart stole him again.

He knew that he was done for. Everything inside of him belonged solely to Hannibal Lecter, and no matter how much he fought against what came so naturally, he couldn't. He couldn't let go of him, couldn't give him up, no matter what his mind said, no matter what the world said. Hannibal had him wrapped around his finger, and every single second spent without him was a second wasted.

The letter had been dropped through the slot in the door, alone. Hannibal had come by, dropped it in himself, Will was sure. He'd resisted the urge to try and run after him, knowing full well that if he didn't want to be spotted, he wouldn't be. Will picked up the letter before darting back to his bedroom, locking the door behind him. He feared the worst but hoped for the best as he broke open the wax seal, pulling the letter out of its envelope.

Mr. Hannibal Lecter

requests the pleasure of

your company for dinner

Bell End, Worcestershire

The house at the end of the street

Tonight, eight o'clock.

Don't be late.

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The moment that Will came within view of Hannibal's home, he immediately felt underdressed. It was massive - he'd not been lying when he said he'd been born into wealth. It made the ramshackle house he'd been living in with his father look like a shack, not even fit for human life in comparison. Hannibal had never made him feel like less, but the moment that he saw it, he immediately felt worthless and out of place in his plaid button-down and slacks worn with holes.

He made every effort of straightening his shirt, of looking presentable, but his efforts seemed utterly futile. He took a deep breath, hesitated for a moment, and knocked on the door once, twice. It was mere seconds before Will could hear feet padding across the heavy hardwood floors, toward the door, and only a second longer before it was pulled open to reveal a particularly dashing Hannibal Lecter.

He had abandoned his usual getup of a tweed jacket and slacks for something more sophisticated. A proper suit, tailored to fit him perfectly. A bowtie tied straight around his neck. Hair slicked back. He looked like a proper gentleman, not an ounce of unsophistication left in him. Will gulped hard, wishing that he had the money to buy a suit himself, or at least something nicer than this. He felt so small…

And then Hannibal flashed that smile at him and it was all okay.

Every feeling of inadequacy dissolved into his grin, every bit of him that felt unworthy disappearing into the way that Hannibal looked at him. Hannibal looked at him like he was above all others, like a god who had found his equal. Will couldn't help but smile back, if just a bit sheepishly. Will pushed a stray curl from his face, staring up at him like a schoolgirl staring up at the boy she'd been crushing on all year. It was humiliating, but he couldn't quite help it.

"Good evening, William." Hannibal greeted, entire face lit up with his smile. It was genuine, more genuine than he had ever seen. Will wasn't quite sure what he had planned that made him look so giddy, but he was excited to find out.

"G' evening." Will greeted, nodding toward him. What was he supposed to say? What was meant to be said? Were they supposed to go back to acting like friends, or were they something more than that? What was this unspoken thing between them? Did it need to be spoken, or was in content in its silence? If not, how was he supposed to say any of it? Will's head was spinning, and yet, everything still seemed to revolve around the man standing in front of him, everything spinning too fast around him, until Hannibal was all that mattered.

"Please, come in." He offered with a grin, holding the door open for him.

Will smiled and obeyed, slipping through the door, coming close enough to get a whiff of that familiar scent that he had been desperately searching for. Cedar and wine and chocolate and fire.
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He sighed, eyes drifting shut for just a moment, savoring it. The whole house smelled like him, and Will decided that he could live here if it meant that.

Inside, the house was ornate, elegant, but lonely. In his own home, it had something resembling coziness, despite the beer smell and the bottles and the deadbeat dad, who couldn't stay sober for the life of him. It was small, and warm, and there was at least something personal about it. His books, well-read and loved until the binding was broken and the covers were damn near falling off. There were pictures of his mom, and his dad, and him, all taken before his mom had died. His dad had been a photographer before falling into his hole of depression and alcohol, and Will made sure to keep all his old photos around. It made it feel like home. But Will couldn't spot anything of personal significance here.

“If you could kick your shoes off, that'd be appreciated.” Hannibal suggested.

Will obeyed, kicking the tattered shoes into the corner. From there, Hannibal led him silently into the kitchen, a feast spread across the table. More than either of them could even dream of eating, more food than Will had ever seen in his life. His stomach rumbled, remembering all the nights that he had gone hungry. He licked his lips, unable to even begin to name most of these, food from all over the world. Hannibal had mentioned liking to cook, but *this much*...

“Whoa.” Will breathed.

“I wasn't sure what you liked… So I made a bit of everything.” Hannibal confessed sheepishly.

Will smiled up at him, unsure of what to do. Would it be strange to kiss him, or were they avoiding physical contact? He pushed his hands deep into his pockets, just in case they were, and he turned to the food, taking a step toward the table. Hannibal took a step ahead of him, getting to the table fast enough to pull out a chair for him. Always the perfect gentleman. Will had always seen him as the arrogant gentleman, the polite narcissist, but any sense of self-importance was shed and suddenly he seemed as human as anyone.

Hannibal took his own seat across the table, reaching for a bottle of red wine that he had sat at the end of the table, pouring Will a glass before pouring one for himself. He moved with a certain quiet hesitancy in him, like he was nervous. Human. Will smiled up at him, feeling much in the same, unsure of where this was going. Where they were going.

“Well… Dig in.” Hannibal said with a small smile.

Will obeyed without the slightest bit of restraint, shoveling food onto his plate. No way that he was going to let the food go to waste. He had gone hungry too many times to take a feast like this for granted. Hannibal chuckled at his eagerness, waiting for him to finish before reaching for his own food, the two of them eating in relative silence until they were too full to continue. The sound of chewing and crackling fire from the next room filled the air, but as the fire began to simmer and their food was gone, the silence hung heavy in the air, like neither of them knew what to say.

Or maybe they were just waiting to say it.

“Let's take this to the den.” Hannibal suggested.

Will didn't protest. What reason did he have to? He pushed out of his chair, following the older man into the next room, taking a seat in an overstuffed leather chair in front of the fireplace. Hannibal took the chair across from him, their knees nearly touching. His eyes looked darker in the light of

the fire, shadows cast across his face, and damn if he wasn't beautiful. Will was half tempted to crawl into his lap, claim his lips again, despite what he had been telling himself about how wrong it was. Death had marked him anyways, Hell would damn him anyways. Damn the consequences.

“The food was amazing.” Will complimented after a moment, unable to think of what else to say. What else could be said? The tension was suffocating.

“Thank you, Will.” He replied quietly, though his voice was distant, like he wasn't quite there, like he was lost in his own thoughts. Will bit his lip, wishing desperately that he could get into his head, that he could know what he was thinking.

Silence filled the air between them again, and Will began to wonder if he should leave. If he should go home and try to forget that Hannibal Lecter had ever existed.

“My apologies for waiting so long to contact you. That was… incredibly rude. To leave you without answers.” Hannibal apologized after a long silence, the two of them sitting quietly across from each other.

“It's okay.” Will assured.

“I… I needed time to think of how to ask this. Needed time to decide whether it's a good idea. We left off in some very… compromising positions. And I think both of us could have used the time to process it. Decide what we wanted. And I've made my decision.”

“And what's that?”

Hannibal rose to his feet, closing the gap between them, straightening his suit. Suddenly, all that godlike power came back and Will was left to cower and worship at his feet, and count himself lucky to do so. He stared up at him with wide eyes, admiring the way the light of the flames licked at his pale skin, the way his dark eyes stared straight into him.

“I choose you.” He vowed.

Will let out a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding, his entire body seeming to relax. He wanted him too. Hannibal Lecter chose him above the rest of the world, and that was all that mattered. Hannibal wanted him. Hannibal was ready to forsake the rest of the world for him. And Will… He was ready to do the same.

“And what might that entail?” Will murmured.

“I want to be with you. Your boyfriend, your partner, your lover, I don't care. I don't care what you call me.” Hannibal murmured, just loud enough for him to hear him over the crackling fire, leaning over him until their faces were inches apart. “As long as you call me yours.”

Will’s hands trembled as he rose them to rest around the sides of Hannibal’s neck, keeping him close and offering him no hope of escape, of running away. He pressed his forehead against Hannibal’s, eyes closing as he held him close, savoring the feeling of being *close.* His breath on his skin, his pulse beating against his palms. The closeness of it all was overwhelming, and all that he could ever dare to ask for. Just to be close to him was enough.

“You know that it's wrong… You and I. Together.” Will whispered, though he wasn't quite sure why. The two of them were gods, above right and wrong now. There was no sin where they stood.

They made their own morality, made their own rights, made their own wrongs. No one could tell them to the contrary.

“Tell me, Will. Does this feel wrong?” Hannibal breathed.

Hannibal pulled him close, gently, lips grazing over his much too lightly. Will’s eyes fluttered closed as he pulled him closer, if only a bit. His lips tasted like wine and Will could almost swear that he was drunk off of them, tipsy as he kissed the only man that he had ever fallen for, the only person who had ever understood him. This was what he had been dreaming of night after night since the first time, and Will couldn't get enough.

Hannibal pulled away slightly, forehead pressed against Will’s, eyes locked. “Does it feel wrong to you, Will? Do our feelings for one another feel wrong to you?”

Will let out a small breath. “No.”

In one swift motion, Hannibal was on top of him, pulling the younger man forward, pulling his legs around his waist. Their lips collided and the world melted around them. It was white hot, burning like the sun, burning through his veins. They burned so bright that Will was convinced that they had become one with the stars. They were stars, they were kings, they are gods.

Will wrapped his legs tighter around the older man’s waist, pulling him down tight against him, holding him as close as humanly possible. Their first kiss had been more tender, full of unspoken love and everything that they had been holding back. Now, it was heavy, and hot, and desperate. Will kissed back hard, clinging to him for dear life as he quickly grew breathless, holding tight to him.

Will pushed against him as the older man began to grind against him, his hardened length trapped inside his slacks pressing against the space between his legs, leaving him with a tugging in his belly as he began to harden. He had felt arousal, had given the occasional curious tug at his cock, but had never gone any further than that. Girls were never too interested in him, and he was never too interested in them. But this, this was something new entirely.

“Does *this* feel wrong?” Hannibal inquired with a wicked grin, pulling away slightly.

Will shook his head hard. “Of course not. Never.” He breathed, desperate for more. For his lips, for his touch, for his skin pressed against his. He needed *more.* He needed everything that Hannibal had to offer him. “Yours. I'm yours.”

Hannibal smiled before claiming his lips against, slipping a hand between them, tracing his body. His fingers grazed over his chest, drawing a small hitch in his breath when he brushed over his nipples, the sound swallowed by Hannibal’s kiss. His hand ghosted down the flat plain of his stomach, down to the swelling bulge in his trousers, cupping it in the palm of his hand.

Will pulled away hard, head thrown back in from the shock of his touch, fingers massaging gently at his length through his pants. Hannibal just smirked up at him, pleased by the reaction that such a simple touch could provoke. Will’s fingers gripped wildly at his shirt, pulling him closer, pulling him tighter. He had never felt anything like it, anything so intense, and he knew that the feelings would only get stronger from there. Whether or not he would survive it, he was unsure.

“Do you trust me?” Hannibal inquired quietly.

“Yes.” Will answered, meaning it wholeheartedly.

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“Follow me.”

He did. He obeyed, rising to his feet after the older boy, never once letting go of his hand as he led the way up the stairs. He followed in a haze, some part of him knowing what was coming, the other not knowing what to expect. He followed close behind him, following him wherever he led.

He led into what seemed to be the master bedroom. A king-sized bed lined with red satin sheets stood in the center of the room. There was a heavy oak dresser, and a door that what he assumed to be the master bath. Gorgeous, nearly as big as Will’s entire home. But he couldn't focus on the aesthetics of the room, far too distracted by Hannibal’s touch, pulling him close.

“Do you trust me?” Hannibal murmured again.

“Always.”

Hannibal smiled and claimed his lips again, slowly guiding him back to the bed. Back onto satin sheets, drowning in red silk as Hannibal gently laid him back, treating him with a certain amount of care. Not once breaking contact, Hannibal’s fingers began to work against the buttons, undoing them one by one, until he was bare from the waist up.

“Beautiful, *mylimasis.”* Hannibal breathed, taking him in. Will felt vulnerable beneath his gaze - vulnerable and worshiped, the bashful god quivering beneath the gaze of his faithful servant.

Will didn't respond. Rather, he curled his fingers around his shirt, pulling him down over top of him, stealing his lips again. Will began working at Hannibal’s button, forcing off his jacket, then his tie, then his shirt, throwing everything aside without much regard for it. The air between them began to heat again, fire beginning to burn again as it grew more and more heavy, kissing until they were breathless, tearing until they were bare.

Will's cock ached in his trousers as Hannibal’s hands ghosted over him again. Pinching lightly at his nipples, running his fingers through the downy hair that disappeared down into his pants. His hand curled around the outline of his cock, causing it to twitch hard, leaking and staining his underwear. He moaned, pushing into his touch, knowing that he wouldn't last long.

Hannibal’s fingers dipped beneath his waistband, and Will let him. Anxiety began to churn in him, having never gotten so close to anyone in his life, but he wasn't about to stop, unsure if he could if he wanted to. Hannibal tugged down his slacks, pulling them off and tossing them aside, leaving him bare and exposed to another soul for the first time in his life.

A hardened lump began to solidify in his throat as anxiety began to tear at him. Hannibal’s eyes were studying him, staring at him like a masterpiece. But Will felt like anything but. His hardened length rested on his belly, pre-cum leaking across his flesh. His skin was flushed red, his chest heaving as he lay beneath the older man. Every brush of his fingertips felt amplified, like everything was brighter and louder and hotter… And Will was squirming.

“Are you nervous, William?” Hannibal whispered.

There was no point in lying. Will nodded.

“Are you a virgin?”

Will’s breath caught in his throat. Again, Will had assumed that the older man had already known it as fact. He so often had to remind himself that Hannibal wasn't actually a god, that he was as human as anyone, even if he didn't act much like it, or didn't believe it himself.

“Yes.” Will whispered.

Hannibal pressed a kiss against his forehead, then his nose, peppering his face with kisses as he stripped himself bare, tossing his pants to the side. Will didn't dare look, fearing that he might die at the sight of him in his full magnificence. Instead, his eyes went between staring up at the ceiling and at the back of his eyelids. He wasn't entirely certain what it was that he feared - this *was* what he had wanted. But why was he so nervous?

“I want you to be ready. Sex is a very intimate thing, and your virginity should hardly be something to let go of unless you are certain that you're ready.” Hannibal murmured. “If you aren't ready, we’ll wait until you are. But not a second sooner, alright?”

“I want you.” He breathed. “I want this. I want this to happen. Tonight.”

Hannibal smiled softly, pressing a kiss against his lips.

“I'm going to take care of you, *mylimasis.”* Hannibal breathed, and Will believed him. At this point, Hannibal could have led him to his death and Will still would have trusted him with his life. He nodded slightly, earning another soft kiss before the older boy pulled away.

Will resisted the urge to cover himself as he turned to watch Hannibal rummaging through his drawers for a moment before pulling out three strips of red silk and returning to the bed. He sat up on the edge, and Will followed his actions, pulling himself upright, legs crossed in futile attempt to preserve some semblance of modesty. Hannibal held the silk out for him to see, examine, showing him exactly what he wanted.

“Do you trust me?”

And with blind faith, Will met him dead in the eye. “Yes.”

Hannibal flashed him a devious smile before rising to his feet again, stepping behind the younger man, fingers lightly caressing his skin. He ran his hand through his dark curls, pushing them away from his eyes. Will looked up, capturing Hannibal’s eyes one last time, those dark eyes that he had grown to love, knowing that this would be the last time that he would look him in the eye as a virgin.

Hannibal Lecter was going to take his virginity.

It registered entirely for the first time as he looked into his eyes, and his heart skipped a beat. He was somewhere between nervous and excited, though he found the emotions to be quite similar in nature. He was going to lose his virginity. He took a deep breath, feeling the flutters in his belly, and nodded. He was ready. Ready to surrender everything that he had to the only god that he had ever cared to believe in. The only god he cared to worship.

“Good boy.” Hannibal whispered, wrapping the silk over his eyes until he could see nothing but red, tying it tight around him. Will let out a shaky sigh, his faith resting in the hands of Hannibal Lecter.

He felt Hannibal straddling his legs, fingers curling around the base of his neck as he kissed him again. Will could feel the older man’s cock pressed against his belly, the slippery feeling of the head of his cock against his skin causing his stomach to flip. Will let out a small sigh, pressing closer, deepening the kiss, holding him close. He had never been so close to another person, physically and spiritually, their souls as intertwined as their bodies.

“Lay back.” Hannibal instructed.

Will obeyed, leaning back slowly as Hannibal stacked the pillows behind his head, propping him up until he was sitting half upright. Naked and blind and worshipped, the older man let his hands ghost over him, sending shivers down his spine. Will let out a shuddered sigh as Hannibal returned over top of him, straddling his hips and pressing his lips against his neck, slowly kissing a line down his throat and across his collarbone. He suckled bruises across his skin, marking him and claiming him as his own. Will relaxed into his touch, sighing softly as he felt his arousal and want bubbling up inside of him.

Will felt Hannibal’s fingers wrap gently around his wrists, thumb running over a faded scar that had been there for years. Will struggled to breathe, burying his face into the crook of Hannibal’s neck, breathing him in, the scent of him comforting. Will felt the satin wrapping around his wrists, once, twice, before securing the other end to the headboard, doing the same to the other, leaving his hands locked in place. Will inhaled slowly, eyes closing behind the blindfold. Bound and blinded, entirely at the mercy of Hannibal Lecter.

“Why are you tying my hands up?” Will inquired quietly once he was secured.

“Why are you asking so many questions?” Hannibal teased before planting a quick kiss on his head. “I want some measure of control, I suppose. I want you entirely at my mercy. I believe that surrendering your control to me for the night may bring you some comfort.”

Will gulped hard, and his cock twitched hard between his thighs. Something about being dominated and disciplined had him hard, something about being entirely beneath his his thumb had him squirming with anticipation. With need, with want, leaking copiously onto his belly. How easy it must have been to see straight through him.

“If you want me to stop, just tell me. I will not do anything that you don't want me to, okay?” Hannibal assured, caressing his inner thigh. “I want you to be vocal tonight. You know your body more than I do. I want to tell me what you like, what you want more of, or less of, even if you telling me consists of a scream, or a moan. Restrain nothing tonight.”

“Okay.” Will breathed.

“Tonight is about you, and your pleasure. I want to make your first time enjoyable. I want it to be… special.” Hannibal breathed, lips grazing over his collarbone. “We’ll go slow. I don't want to risk hurting you.” He vowed, slowly leaving a line of small bruises down his chest, until he reached a nipple, lips closing hard around it.

The flick of his tongue against the hardened nub drew a small gasp from the younger boy’s lips as he bucked up into his mouth. Such simple stimulation was already enough to have him tugging at

his restraints, head thrown back at his touch. He could feel Hannibal smile around him, rewarding each small squirm with a harder suck, leaving him leaking all over himself, making a mess of himself.

"More." Will breathed, needing more than the tortuous suck and nip against his chest. He needed all that Hannibal had to offer him. Needed every touch, every pleasure, needed it all. It was as if everything in his life had been leading up to this moment, and he was greedily wishing for all that had been denied before.

"As you wish." Hannibal chuckled quietly, slowly pulling away from his chest, kissing his way down to the downy patch of hair just above his cock, harder than it had ever been, aching with his anticipation. Hannibal hesitated, waiting, teasing, making him ache for it, the feeling of his breath brushing against the slick, shiny head of his cock positively agonizing.

And then his lips curled around the head of his cock and Will let out an unrestrained cry, bucking hard into his mouth, earning a small laugh from Hannibal as he pulled back. Will couldn't see him, but he could imagine that he was shaking his head in amusement, chuckling at the younger man's inexperience. Will's face flushed hot, blushing hard as he cursed himself for getting so over-eager.

"Perhaps try to hold still, *mylimasis."* Hannibal chuckled softly, pressing a small kiss against his hip bone.

"Sorry." Will said, face flushed with embarrassment.

"May I try again?" He inquired. "Or are you going to attempt to gag me again?"

"Piss off." Will laughed.

"Language, young man."

Will was about to bite back with some snarky response when Hannibal took him between his lips again. The shock of it had him paralyzed, crying out as his head threw back against the pillows, pulling so hard at the silk around his wrists that he feared they might tear. He wasted no time, taking him in his whole. Will's back arched, the damp warmth surrounding him. All around him, drawing him close to the edge, though of what, Will wasn't certain yet. The edge of glory, perhaps.

The pleasure spread through him as Hannibal began to move, fucking his own mouth on Will's cock, the stimulation damn near unbearable. Will was clinging to his ropes, struggling not to fall into this abyss just yet, wanting to feel him a bit longer, not ready for the end. He threw himself back hard, crying out so loudly that he feared the neighbors may hear him. He was breathless, winded, his mind spinning as the older man sucked harder, taking him deeper and deeper still.

It was all so much. So overwhelming that Will could barely think. One of his senses denied, everything else felt stronger, more intense, slamming through his veins. The sounds that Hannibal's mouth made, each suck, the wet sound of skin on skin. The smell was intoxicating, the familiar scent of Hannibal and the newer scent of sex filling the room. Will could almost feel Hannibal, pushing his way into his head, if only just an inch. Empathy had once come so naturally, scarily, imagination being his worst enemy. Hannibal, though, had been the only one able to keep him out until now. Will could almost taste the heaviness on his tongue, could feel an excitement and reverence and anticipation that wasn't his own.

And touch. *Oh, touch.*

He almost couldn't stand it. The damp warmth around his aching cock was all he could have ever dreamt for, the pleasure hitting him like a hurricane, slamming against him at full force. He wanted to push deeper, thrust into his mouth, but Hannibal had him still, holding him down as he continued to suck and lick, tongue swirling at the slit before taking him in again.

And suddenly, the wet heat of his mouth was replaced by his hands, curling around his length and stroking him quickly, in time with the beating of his heart. It was like he was trying to pull him over the edge, even though they'd only been at this for about two minutes. Like he wanted to pull him over and over and over again, push him into pleasure so overwhelming that he'd not be able to think or breathe or exist beyond that moment. Will knew that Hannibal was determined to bring him to the point of no return a million times before the sun rose.

“Such a good boy, Will. My good boy.” Hannibal whispered. “Come for me. Come for me, *mylimasis.”*

With his quiet words of praise, Will came undone, thrown violently from the edge of the cliff he had been so desperately clinging to. He came with a shout, entirety of him trembling and pounding with the pulse in his ears. Hot, white ropes of semen striped his belly, leaving him messy and filthy for the man that sat between his thighs. The feeling was more intense and all-consuming than anything that he had felt in his life, leaving him writhing in satin sheets as he made a mess of himself.

He’d never felt anything like it. All-consuming and overwhelming, slamming over him like a tidal wave as Hannibal stroked him, milking his pleasure from him until there was nothing more to take. His brain shorted out, thoughts refusing to come, every unsavory thought now drowned beneath his pleasure. All that there was now was the throbbing pulse of his body and *Hannibal.*

Maybe it was the hormones, but Will could swear that he was in love with the man. Had never loved anyone more. As he cried out, he could taste his name on his lips, though he wasn't quite certain that it came out in coherent sound, or if it was all jumbled together with the sound of his cries. *Hannibal. Hannibal.*

“Good boy.” Hannibal praised.

Will slowly came down, though he didn't come back entirely. Instead, he remained floating somewhere off in space, head in the stars as he slumped limply, dark curls hanging in his face and eyes shut behind his blindfold. He swayed softly where he sat as he felt the member between his thighs begin to soften and sleep threatened to take him into its depths. He was tempted to sink into it, let himself fall asleep where he was, raised so high to come back down so hard.

“William… Come back to me, *mylimasis,* I'm not finished with you yet.” Hannibal whispered, fingertips caressing his inner thighs.

“Too sleepy.” Will mumbled, ready to curl up and go to sleep, despite the mess, despite the satin around his wrists. He wanted to fall into Hannibal’s arms and be held there until the morning came and they could do this again, Hannibal’s mouth wrapped around his length again, until he could fly again.

“Orgasm has that effect.” The older boy explained, smile in his voice. “Nonetheless, this is only the beginning. Try to stay with me.”

Will let out a small sigh and nodded. If it meant feeling like he had, the overwhelming rush of sensation, he decided that resisting sleep was worth it. As he felt Hannibal's tongue pressing against his skin, cleaning him off as arousal began to light in his belly again. He let out a shuddered, breathy moan underneath him, savoring in the feeling of the flat of his tongue, each lick followed by a hard suck, further marking him as owned by Hannibal Lecter.

By the time he was done, Will was already beginning to harden again. Between his fingers drawing circles in his thighs and his tongue all over his body, there was no way that Will could control himself. Hannibal, though, seemed pleased by the development, making a satisfied noise as he pulled away, nudging his legs further apart to get a better look of him. Will could feel his eyes on him, could feel the hunger in his gaze. Will gulped, waiting for him to make a move.

"I'm going to hold your legs up above your head. Tell me if you're uncomfortable and we'll make the proper adjustments. But I want you to do exactly as I say. Do you trust me?"

"Yes." Will breathed.

Hannibal's hands ghosted down the sides of his legs until he reached his ankles, slowly pulling them up into the air until they were straight up and everything was exposed to the older man. Will took a deep breath, something between arousal and anxiety in the pit of his belly as Hannibal propped a pillow up beneath him, pushing him back further into the bed. Hannibal's fingers traced patterns into the insides of his thighs as he leaned down, breath hot against him.

"I'm going to open you up to me. I'm going to start with my tongue, then move onto fingers. There may be some pain to begin with, but it will soon melt to pleasure, I assure you. If it becomes too much for you to bear, I'll stop and there are other things that we can do. But this is something I want for you to experience." Hannibal explained.

"You're *what?"* Will inquired, confused as to what was going to happen, unsure of how whatever it was that he was describing could ever feel *good.*

"Do you trust me?" Hannibal replied simply, though he said it like a challenge.

Will nodded slowly, deciding that Hannibal would never hurt him, never touch him in a way that he didn't want to be touched. He could almost feel Hannibal smirking at him, that signature smirk that never failed to make him weak in the knees.

And then the damp heat of Hannibal's mouth was pressed against his hole, and he was sold. His toes curled tight as Hannibal pressed the flat of his tongue against his rim, the feeling curious and new and oh-so-good in ways that Will wasn't even sure how to describe. The vulnerability of it, the feeling of his tongue exploring places most private, touching him in ways that he had never been touched before… It had him hardening against his belly, panting and moaning in the throes of pleasure.

He could feel everything, every little pulse and twitch of his tongue as it traced over the tight ring of muscle. He could feel himself twitching and contracting at the feeling of him. *"Hannibal…"* He murmured, rocking as best as he could onto his tongue, struggling for more as the older man speared past his rim and into his body. The feeling of having him pressed inside of his body had him trembling, shaking as Hannibal's tongue thrust shallowly into him.

His back arched sharply as Hannibal raised a hand, cupping it around his balls, massaging them gently in the palm of his hand. The movement was slow, deliberate, smooth and slick between his

thighs as Will moaned, loud and unrestrained. He continued to thrust his tongue into him, and the combined stimulation was enough to force him back over the edge, back into freefall, nearly enough to make him come untouched, leaking all over himself. He rocked harder onto his tongue, wanting to feel the warmth spread through his entire body, wanting him deeper inside.

He wanted to be filled by the older boy in every way, wanted to be intertwined with him in the most primal of ways. He wanted to feel the warmth of him spread through every inch of him, until he could taste him on his tongue. He was captivated, hostage to his touch, and there was nowhere else he would rather be than here, at the mercy of the only god he believed in. Rocking on his tongue, tugging at his restraints, blinded for fear of being turned to dust at the sight of him in his unobstructed entirety.

“Eager boy.” Hannibal murmured, lips moving from his hole and letting his legs down. “I believe you're ready for the next part. I think you'll find this most enjoyable, gauging by your reaction to my tongue alone.” He was close again, straddling his legs as he reached up and began to untie his hands from the headboard. “Though, first, I must ask you something very important.”

“And what's that?” Will inquired, some small bit of challenge in his voice.

“How did it feel?” Hannibal whispered, lips grazing his skin, breath hot against his ear. “My tongue inside of you, slowly opening you to me… Tell me how it felt. In detail.”

Will gulped, feeling goosebumps beginning to prickle at his flesh. He let out a shuddered breath as Hannibal rocked slightly against him, feeling the velvety glide of his cock against his own. “It felt… Warm. Like this warmth flooding through my body. All through me. In my belly, and my… my…” Will hesitated. What was he supposed to call it in this context? *Penis* seemed too formal, and…

“Your cock?” Hannibal suggested, rocking slightly against him, bringing a hitch to his breath.

“Mmhmm.” Will hummed, stomach flipping at the four letters.

“Don't be afraid to call it what it is. You mustn’t be afraid to use your words. I want you to be able to tell me where you like to be touched without hesitation or shame because of a childhood taboo of a word. Call it what it is. This,” Hannibal reached between them, curling his strong hand around the two of them, cocks lined together as he gave them a firm pump, drawing a whimper from Will’s throat. “Is your cock.”

Will just nodded. Hannibal raised his hands, untying the other hand and pressing it back against the headboard, his only restraint being his lover’s palms.

“Continue.”

“Huh?”

“Continue describing how it felt. I want more detail, Will.” Hannibal insisted, his hands curled around the younger man’s wrists, curling tighter, just ever so subtly. Just hard enough to make him feel it, just hard enough to leave fingerprint bruises there in the morning. “Start from where you left off.”

“It… I… I felt warmth. Spreading through me. Through my belly, and my chest, and my… my c-cock. All over. Through me.” Will stammered. “Like you were in me. Everywhere. In my veins.

Like we… like we were conjoined."

Will could practically feel that damned smirk, that little crooked smile as he stared down at him. Will bit his lip as Hannibal finally released his hands, pulling them down and guiding them down in front of Will, almost like a convict in handcuffs, or a man kneeling to pray. Perhaps he was both tonight. Sinner and saint. Prisoner and devout follower of his divine law.

"Your wrists are red. A bit bruised. You've been tugging too hard against your restraints. Try to relax. Don't pull too hard next time." He scolded quietly, fingers brushing over the purpling bruises. Will couldn't see them, but he could feel them, aching into the hollows of his bones. "Are you hurt?"

"They're fine, Han. I'm okay. Promise." Will assured. "I like it."

He could hear Hannibal let out a breath with something like arousal. Aroused by the fact that he liked the pain, aroused by the fact that he liked to be marked and owned. Will smirked devilishly, wearing the bruises around his wrists like a badge of honor, pleased with the fact that they'd been left there. His smiled turned to something a bit softer, a bit more genuine, as Hannibal raised his hands up to his lips, kissing gently at the bruises left there. Will closed his eyes, melting into his touch until he finally pulled away, moving his hands back into place in front of him.

"I'm going to tie your hands together in front of you, and guide you into a new position. It will make penetration more comfortable, not to mention accessible for me. I want you to do exactly as I say. Do you trust me?" Hannibal explained, fingers tracing circles over the bruises.

"You know I do."

Will could feel his smile as the older boy slowly began to wrap his wrists with the silk, binding his hands together until the were pressed together like a man praying to his god. Once they were secured in place, Hannibal's lips grazed over this knuckles, treating him with a tenderness that Will had never been shown before. He wanted to pull the older man close, hold him tight and thank him, cherish him like nothing before, wanting to make his gratitude and love known. He wanted Hannibal to know how much it meant to be touched for the very first time. But he stayed still.

"Exactly as I say, okay? I'm going to position you, and I don't want you to move." Hannibal instructed, slowly slipping away from him to stand next to the bed.

His hands guided him down again, this time onto his right side, rather than onto his back, arms tucked beneath him as Hannibal shifted some of his weight onto his chest. It wasn't the most comfortable of positions, but Will obeyed and stayed still, pliant as Hannibal guided his body. He pushed his left leg up against his chest, cock pressed up against the bed and hole exposed. Will let out a small noise, the silk pressed against his cock forcing an overwhelming urge to thrust, rub himself against the sheets until he came. But even as hard as the urge was to fight, he remained still, even as his throat began to tighten and his muscles began to tense.

"Now, you may feel a bit of pain at first, especially seeing as this is your first time being penetrated. There will be a bit of resistance at the rim, and it may sting at first. Don't try to fight the pain, though. Let it come, and relax into it. Let your body open to me. I assure you that, once you've been sufficiently lubricated and I am able to find your prostate… Well, the experience should be… Most enjoyable."

Will gulped, feeling his heartbeat thrumming through him as he sat in anticipation, listening at Hannibal rummaged through the dresser at the end of the bed before climbing back onto the mattress. He heard something that he couldn't place; the twist of a metal cap on glass, maybe. “This is going to be cold. It won't last long, though.” Hannibal warned.

He was right. As a slick finger pressed against his hole, he hissed at the cold. It was nothing like his tongue, warm and wet and twitching and alive. Instead, it was cold, at least at first contact, though, as his finger, slick and slippery, rubbed at massaged firmly against his rim, it quickly grew to be pleasant. Will buried his face into the pillow, breathing labored as he struggled to stay still, struggling not to squirm beneath his probing fingertips.

Once Hannibal deemed him wet enough, he finally began to push past the rim, working in precise, shallow increments, focusing on working him open rather than his pleasure, though Will still found the stimulation intense, causing a damp spot to form beneath him as the fluid dripped from his cock and into the fabric. He could feel the sting, the stretching burn as his body was being opened for the first time, but even still, the idea of being opened and filled had him solid and leaking into the bed.

“More, Han…. Please. I need more.” Will pleaded, wanting nothing more. He didn't know what waited on the other side, what waited for him once he did push further side, but he knew that he needed more than this teasing. “Please, Han… I'm ready.”

“Eager, you are. Impatient. But I'll not keep you waiting.” Hannibal chuckled, hovering over top of him, continuing to probe lightly at the rim as he pressed kisses against his shoulder. “I want you to inhale. As deeply as you can. Into your chest, not your belly. Keep firmness here.” Hannibal reached beneath him and pressed a hand over his belly, holding just over his diaphragm. “Now breathe…”

Will obeyed, inhaling slowly as he pushed back into Hannibal’s body as his lungs filled with air, easing the breathless feeling that had settled in his chest since they had started.

“Good boy. Now, I want you to exhale as I press in. I need you to relax. Your body's first instinct will be to squeeze. Push me out. But you are entirely capable of overriding this instinct. This should be easier for you, considering how receptive you've been thus far. Just exhale and relax.” Hannibal instructed. “Are you ready?”

Will nodded silently.

Hannibal smiled against his skin and slowly began to push further inside, the burning sensation mostly faded and dulled as he grew used to the pressure. As he slipped deeper inside, he resisted the urge to clench, forcing himself to breathe, forcing himself still. Will exhaled slowly as his body grew accustomed to the feeling of fullness, adjusting to the stretch of having something inside of him. *Inside of him.* Hannibal Lecter was *inside of him.*

“How do you feel?” Hannibal inquired once his finger was sheathed fully inside, the other hand gently massaging the curve of his ass, slowly working up his thigh, like he was spreading him open from the outside.

“Full.” Will breathed, resisting the urge to rock back onto his finger. He liked the feeling of being filled, the feeling of Hannibal inside of him. It didn't feel *good,* exactly, not in the way that it felt when Hannibal’s lips were around his cock, but there was still something so intense about it.

“Full?”

“Full.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

He heard Hannibal let out a quiet huff of laughter. “Well, you will be feeling much fuller by the end of the night. This is only the beginning, dear boy.” Hannibal assured.

Will inhaled slowly, unsure if he could take much more. He was only one finger in and Will already felt full to bursting. How could he possibly take more? How could he possibly take something as big as Hannibal’s cock? Still, he stayed still, refusing to let his worries ruin the night.

“Now let me…” Hannibal muttered, and Will could feel his finger twisting inside of him, the movement making his cock twitch hard. He could feel him probing, like he was searching for something, and…

The pleasure shot through him like a bullet as he let out a cry, back arching sharply as he buried his face into the pillow, the cry muffled as Hannibal massaged at the hardened little nub inside of him. He slowly began to pump his finger in and out of his body, each thrust pressing pointedly against that place that made him feel *so good.* Each touch sent waves of pleasure through him as he bit down hard on the pillow, trembling hard.

“There we are.” Hannibal whispered, sounding rather pleased with himself.

Will moaned loudly. His cock was straining and leaking so much that he feared he may come again, this time untouched. It was overwhelming, crashing over him like a tidal wave, drowning him in its pleasure until he struggled to breathe.

“This is your prostate, Will. It's highly sensitive, especially in those who have never been touched before.” Hannibal explained, voice nearly clinical as he spoke, though it only served to turn him on more.

Hannibal’s free hand pushed through his curls before tugging roughly, pulling his face from the pillows as his thrusts began to pick up speed, each pointedly slamming against the sweet spot that had him squirming and moaning and threatening to come again. He didn't pull hard enough to hurt, but it was enough to get his head up, thrown back in his pleasure.

“I want to hear you.”

Will let out a shout as Hannibal massaged harder into his prostate, so loud that he could have rattled the foundation of the earth. It was all so much, so overwhelming, so *much.* Will whimpered beneath his touch, everything so overwhelming, yet not nearly enough.

“Well done, darling boy. Very good boy. I'm going to add a second finger, and then a third, and a fourth. Until you can take it without pain. Then we’ll move on.”

Will nodded before letting out a small whimper, leaning back into the pillow as Hannibal gently began to probe with a second finger. He felt the drizzle of cold oil against his hole, clenching hard against the finger still inside of him. Hannibal’s hand grazed down his side in an attempt to relax him, calm him down. Will let out a breath and released, relaxing as he slipped a second finger into his body, pumping in and out of him slowly as his body adjusted to the stretch.

His body began to loosen and open as Hannibal struck against his prostate with each pump of his fingers. Will grew more accustomed to the feeling, relaxing a bit as Hannibal worked him open, his screams and cries softening to the occasional moan and whimper. He eased into his touch, until the lines between them began to blur. Each added finger left him moaning softly, whimpering as he adjusted to the feeling, the pleasure dulling from overwhelming hurricanes to a constant, steady downpour.

“I think that you're ready. Are you ready for me, Will?” Hannibal announced after a few minutes of fucking him with four fingers, loose enough to take whatever Hannibal had to offer him.

“I'm ready.” Will breathed. He was. Oh, he was. Ready to give himself over in full, a holy sacrifice to his unholy god. This was the night when they became one as equals, when Hannibal became human and Will was ascended. This was the night when they would become gods, and Hannibal was going to give him that. And Will was ready.

He could almost feel Hannibal smiling. Not that arrogant smirk, but genuine, soft, something filled with love and affection and adoration. Will couldn't even see his face but there was something that made him feel so loved that he could hardly cope. Never had that boy been loved, not really. A mother who left him too young, who had tried to flee before. A father who cared more for the bottom of the bottle than his own flesh and blood. Friends who were never really more than fond acquaintances. Will had spent his life alone, and now Hannibal was giving him the one thing that he never knew he needed. Love.

“On your back, now, *mylimasis.* I want to see your face.”

Will obeyed silently, shifting, if a bit uncomfortably with his hands tied, onto his back. Hannibal’s hands guided him gently, pulling him onto his back until he was where he wanted him, reaching out and slowly untying his hands, leaving the satin off to the side. Hannibal’s hands curled gingerly around his wrists, trying to cradle his bruised flesh as he brought them back to his lips, pressing kisses into them. Will let out a quiet breath. There was something intimate about this. More intimate than when Hannibal had taken him in his mouth, or opened him with his fingers. It was as if they both knew that this was substantial. That this was what mattered. That this was where two became one.

This was their consummation.

“Do you trust me?”

With free hands and blind eyes, Will reached for the older boy, hands grazing down his shoulders until he found his fingertips, slowly lacing his fingers between his. The spaces between his fingers were right where Will’s fit perfectly, and he could have believed in destiny because of the way his soft skin contrasted with the calluses that covered the younger boy's hands. Slowly, he guided Hannibal’s hand to his chest, just above where his heart was pounding.

“With all my heart.”

Hannibal’s lips brushed over his, gentle and warm as he pulled him close, heat radiating through him as he held the older man close to him. Will wrapped his arms around his neck, every inch of him pressed against him, the two of them gently intertwined. Hannibal had been the first to get into his head, see past his blue eyes and into his thoughts. Hannibal had been the first to push his way into his heart and soul, the first man that he had ever learned to love. And now, he would be the first to be inside of his body, completing their holy trinity.

Will felt the older man reach down slowly between them, wrapping a hand around his own cock. Hannibal gave himself a few cursory pumps, not breaking the contact between them, kissing him deeply as he lined himself up with his hole. Fluid leaked copiously from the slit, the feeling of the head of his cock slippery and wet against his opening. Hannibal swallowed the quiet noise that he made, holding him tight as he steadied himself at his entrance.

“I want to see the look in your eyes as I push into you.” Hannibal whispered as he slowly pulled away from his lips. He slowly reached up and began untying the blindfold, pulling it away as the world came back into focus. Will’s eyes caught Hannibal’s and held there, staring deep into them, those eyes making him feel safe and loved, like nothing could touch him, like nothing could hurt him. “This is the most intimate that you've ever been with anyone, and I have never been more honored. Honored, humbled that it’s me who you've chosen to share this experience with. This is the closest that we have ever been and will ever be. Our bodies as intertwined as our souls.” Hannibal’s fingers pushed through his curls slowly. “Are you ready?”

“I'm ready.” Will murmured. “I want you.”

Hannibal propped himself up slightly, pulling Will's legs up around his waist as to give himself a clearer path into him. Will glanced between them, eyes caught by the sight, captivated. It was so filthy, yet there was something so wonderful, something so beautiful, two ruddy cocks pressed between them. Hannibal’s was bigger than Will’s, dwarfing him in comparison, and for a moment he wondered if it would tear him in two.

“Inhale. Deeply.” Hannibal instructed, one hand steadying his cock and the other pushing against his belly in the way he had before. Will did as he was told, inhaling deep into his lungs, until his head became light. “Just as we did before. Exhale as I push in. And I want your eyes on me.”

Will nodded, gulping down hard as Hannibal slowly began to push himself in. His eyes kept steady on Hannibal’s, those dark eyes capturing him as he pushed in. It was a stretch, even after being opened by his tongue and fingers, but it wasn't painful, not exactly. Will’s hands clutched at his shoulders as the pressure began to overwhelm him, struggling to keep his eyes open and mouth closed as he sunk into the hilt.

“How does it feel?” Hannibal inquired.

“Good. So good.” Will whispered breathlessly, eyes clamping shut as he adjusted to the feeling. “So… full.”

Hannibal smiled, stilling inside of him, allowing the virgin to adjust to the feeling of his cock inside of him. Will breathed him in, holding tightly to him, the scent of wine and chocolate and cedar intoxicating, comforting. Will could feel him pressing insistently against his prostate, throbbing inside of him, sending steady waves of pleasure through him.

“Open your eyes, William.” Hannibal instructed quietly. “Look at me.”

Will obeyed, eyes meeting the older man’s as he clung to him. Slowly, Hannibal pulled away, ever so slightly, just high enough for Will to see between them. Just high enough for him to see the place of their conjoinment. Slowly, instinctively, Will reached down between them, touching gingerly at his rim, and the base of his cock. Will felt the overwhelming crash of emotion at the feeling, touching the place where they became one, where their bodies intertwined and their lines began to blur.

“You're inside of me. *Oh,* you're inside me.” Will breathed, voice trembling.

Hannibal let out a small huff of laughter. “I am. I'm inside of you, *mylimasis.* You've done so well, taking my cock inside of you.” He leaned closer, breath hot against his ear. “I'm so proud of you, *mylimasis.”*

And for the first time, the physicality became unimportant, the spiritual becoming far more prevalent. Hannibal Lecter was inside of him, and everything that had happened between them had led up to this. Every moment that Will had spent by his side, or drowning in his scent, or dreaming about him, had been leading up to this. For the first time, they were true equals. They were gods.

Will fell back onto the bed, lying flat, eyes trained at the ceiling as Hannibal hovered still over him, not moving quite yet. Will breathed, struggling to catch his breath, struggling to think straight. This was what everything in his life had been leading up to him, and Hannibal, bodies and souls intertwined as their love was consummated in satin sheets.

“I love you.” Will murmured, not looking at him to see his reaction. He already knew.

Hannibal blinked once, twice, dumbfounded at three words that had never struck his ears. His parents had whispered them in Lithuanian, Mischa had screamed it in the same way as they dragged her away. But never the words *I love you.* Never with such sincerity.

Slowly, Hannibal began to thrust, wrapping himself around Will, every inch of him intertwined, every inch touched and cradled and held as he began to move inside of the boy. Will moaned, wrapping himself back around the older boy, each thrust deliberate and pointed, striking against his prostate. His cock was trapped between their bellies, each movement stimulating as he already threatened to spill between them. It was all so much, *all too much.*

“Aš taip pat myliu tave, aš jus labai myliu.” Hannibal breathed, every word like a prayer. Hannibal, the proud god, reduced to worship above him. *“Oh, mylimasis.”*

Will moaned loudly, growing breathless as Hannibal delivered another slow thrust into him, the insistent push against his prostate leaving him shaking beneath him. He wasn't going to last long, and he knew that Hannibal wasn't either. Neither of them could last long like this, not in this state, not basking in the glory of it all. The glory of their love, the glory of their consummation.

Will could feel the strain in his thighs, though. The tension in his muscles as he struggled to hold back, to keep control of himself. It was instinct to thrust harder, faster, until they were both satisfied. Hannibal was being gentle with him - too gentle. Treating him as though he might break if he went to fast. Too hard.

“You can… You can go faster.” Will murmured, wrapping his legs tighter around his waist, pulling him in deeper, faster. “I want you to. I want you to go harder.”

And with this, it was as if some feral beast had awoken in him. He let out a small noise, something resembling a growl, and his fingers pressed harder into the younger boy’s hips. Hannibal’s teeth nipped at his shoulder, suckling bruises into his flesh, marked and owned for anyone to see. Will moaned as his hips began to pick up speed, delivering into him at a more brutal pace.

“Feels so good.” Will moaned, pushing back against him, meeting his pace.

Hannibal pushed deeper into him, slamming into him, cock nudging against his prostate with each thrust. One hand wrapped around Will's bruised wrist, pinning it to the bed beneath them. The pressure was building as Will's moans turned to cries of passion, Hannibal letting out soft groans and growls, possessive and hungry. Will's mind began to blur, whatever coherent thought left in him fading into the static. Their minds, their souls, their bodies intertwined, the wet sound of skin on skin filling the room, chasing primal need as they moved together.

"Mine." Hannibal growled, sinking his teeth into Will's flesh, the feeling of pain and pleasure entirely overwhelming. Will let out a sharp cry, arching into his touch, his eyes clenched shut and nothing but red stained behind them. Pulsing, pounding, red. Will's fingernails, short and jagged but there, scraped up the older man's back, marking him as his own. To own and be owned by Hannibal Lecter was a beautiful thing.

"My boy… My darling boy… I'm going to fill you up, mark you with my seed… You belong to me, William, and I you… because you and I belong together." Hannibal murmured. Will could feel the older man's balls drawing up, getting closer to his climax. Will buried his face into the crook of his neck. He was getting close, so close, *so close.*

Will let out a sharp cry as Hannibal's cock slammed deep inside of him, each thrust pointed and rough, reverberating through him. His cock throbbed hard between them, his pulse slamming through his body. He whimpered, trembling beneath him.

"Come inside of me." Will whispered. Begged.

Hannibal reached between them, curling a hand around his cock and stroking him roughly. Will was screaming now, unable to breathe, unable to think as he bucked into his hand. His dark curls thrown back, back arched sharply, pushing back against his brutal thrusts.

And suddenly he was standing on the edge all over again, so close to tumbling over again. He stood on the edge of the glory and the feeling was about to crash over him, drown him in it. He gasped for breath, struggling to breathe as Hannibal touched him, stroked him, finger rubbing over his slit, cock pounding against his prostate…

"I'm close. Gonna come, Han." Will breathed.

"Come for me, Will."

And he did.

He came tumbling over the edge and his orgasm took him over, crashing over him like a tidal wave, pounding through him as he came with a shout. White, hot ropes splashed against his chest, and the edges of his vision began to white out, and every thought was replaced by one thought and only one. *Hannibal.*

He came harder as Hannibal's release followed just after his own. His body contracted hard around his cock, milking Hannibal's orgasm from him. Damp warmth spread through his belly as his orgasm began to subside, leaving him shuddering at the warm feeling. Hannibal was moaning above him, his voice shuddered and muffled as he buried his face in the crook of Will's neck.

They didn't move. Even as they both came down from their orgasms and their cocks began to soften, they didn't move for a long time. Minutes ticked by, until it felt like hours, until it felt like weeks, until it felt like months, before it felt like years, decades, centuries, millennia.

“What are you doing?” Will murmured after what could have been eternity.

“Remembering this.”

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“Do you want one?” Hannibal offered, holding out his box of cigarettes. Will waved it away politely, never caring much for cigarettes. The smoke burned his lungs and he tended to choke. Will was sitting at the edge of the bed, naked, nothing to cover him. There was no need for clothes right then, after what they'd done. After their consummation. Now they sat there quietly, the grunts and moans and cries of sex now absorbed into the walls, nothing but an echo, though Will still felt it buzzing in the air.

“I quite like cigarettes after sex. The perfect way to end any satisfying activity, I think.” Hannibal mused, propping a cigarette between his lips and lighting it. Will turned to him, watching as he puffed at it. He always was attractive when he did that, giving him some edge that gave Will something of a thrill. He watched as he blew out smoke, mesmerized as it drifted into the air around them.

Will wasn't sure what time it was, and wasn't sure how he'd managed to stay awake, but there they sat, lazy and soft spoken and nude. Hannibal relaxed against the pillows, puffing his cigarette, not caring that he was naked. Two weeks ago, Will would have died at the sight, but everything felt new now. As though everything had changed and something new and wild had emerged from the ashes.

“Did you know that Nazi scientists recently discovered a correlation between cigarettes and lung disease? I suppose it should have been obvious. The studies aren’t being taken seriously, though. Because of where it came from.” Hannibal informed, flicking the end of his cigarette into an ashtray on the nightstand. “I don't support them. I'm against what they stand for. But science is science.”

Will hummed quietly, head fuzzy as he swayed slightly. He was tired, too tired to try and maintain conversations about science and Nazis. He was ready to curl up next to the older boy, fall asleep in the arms of the only man that could protect him from the demons in his nightmares. Instead, though, his mind wandered elsewhere as his eyes drifted downward.

“Yours is different than mine.” Will commented out of nowhere, finally getting a glimpse of him in full. Skin hung over the head of his softened length, different than his own.

“My what?”

“Your cock.” His voice was laced with hesitation, the word nearly too taboo to say, the very word sending shocks of arousal through him. He gulped down, shifting slightly.

“Ah. Yes, I suppose it is. I have a foreskin. You do not.” Hannibal explained, eyes drifting closed as he lay there, not much of a care in the world, so it seemed. “All boys are born with one,” He began, answering questions before they were even asked. “Typically, they're left alone. However, the trend is quite startling, how the past few generations have been circumcised in America. Deeply unfortunate, really. Genital mutilation is a cruel thing to do to a boy.”

Will opted not to probe any further, deciding that he knew enough. Or perhaps he was just too tired to get further into the discussion.
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“Though, speaking of cocks and sex and the like, how are you feeling? I didn't hurt you, did I?” Hannibal inquired, voice showing some concern. Like he was afraid that he had hurt him in any way, that it had been too much for the virgin to handle.

Will shook his head. He felt hollower, like he needed to be filled, needed to spend his life full, with Hannibal inside of him and his seed leaking from him. But it didn't hurt. What he felt was far from pain. He wanted *more.* He wanted to be touched and fucked and filled over and over, wanted to spend his life intertwined with Hannibal’s body. It was already seeming that Hannibal had created a monster of him, needy and insatiable. But Will opted to stay quiet on that. For now.

Hannibal patted the bed next to him after another few minutes of silence. “Lay down. Lay with me. You look exhausted, you need sleep.” He invited, and Will obeyed, as he supposed he always might. He shifted over, sinking into the bed on his right side, cradled beneath his arm as they lay side by side, Will immediately drawing close to sleep at the invitation. Hannibal’s arms wrapped around him, cradling him tightly, holding him close. It was all that he had ever wanted. All he'd ever needed.

“What does it mean?” Will mumbled, only half awake.

“What does what mean?” Hannibal inquired, seeming dumbfounded.

”Mylimasis. And *mažai detektyvas.* What do they mean?”

Hannibal let out a small huff of laughter, pressing his lips into his curls. *“Mylimasis* roughly translates to ‘beloved.’ You're my beloved. My… My darling. And *mažai detektyvas* means ‘little detective.’ Which you are. My beloved little detective. My darling little detective.” He explained, earning a small, contented sigh from Will, as though earning his approval.

The moments passed in silence until Hannibal put out his cigarette.

“How come you didn't quit once you found out?” He inquired after a moment, eyes drifting closed as he asked. “About the Nazis and the lung disease?”

“Quit? That was when I started.” Hannibal chuckled. “I wanted to see if men like me can burn. If men like us are truly vulnerable to the smoke.”

“Men like us?”

“Men like us.”

“And what are we, exactly?”

“Gods.”

Ropes and Knives

Shrieks of terror rang through the room, rattling Will from his sleep. It wasn't until he felt the burn in his throat that he realized that he had been the source of the noise, screaming out in horror at the demons in his head, lurking in his nightmares. Blood red eyes staring back at him from the Wych Elm, piercing through his soul, the whispers growing louder, until they were slamming through his bones. The whispers still filled his ears, and the eyes burned against the back of his eyelids, and he screamed. And screamed. And screamed.

“Will, Will, *Will.”* Hannibal cried, sitting up, hands curling around his shoulders in an attempt to wake him up, rouse him from imagined terrors. At the sound of his name over the shrieks and over the whispers, Will slowly struggled back, swimming back to reality. Hannibal was the only anchor in his storm, holding him steady through the wind and rain, always there to tether him.

It had been nearly a month since their relationship had begun, and since then, they'd been inseparable. Will was practically living with the older boy now, the two of them almost never apart. They spent their days researching, and coming up with little, and spending each evening fucking away the disappointment that followed. They struggled with keeping their hands to themselves, often finding themselves within each other's embrace at all hours of the day. They talked late into the night, and rose again the next morning with newfound hope. It was something good that they had here.

Will slept more soundly here, with him, too. It didn't stop the nightmares, didn't stop the eyes from staring from the tree, but he always woke right where he meant to. There was no more sleepwalking, no more wandering to eerie places in the middle of the night. He always woke right in their shared bed, right next to Hannibal Lecter. Even when he woke screaming.

“Will, look at me. Look at me.” Hannibal insisted. “Your name is Will Graham. It's 3:09 AM. You’re-”

“I'm in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England. It's July 15th, 1944. My name is Will Graham. It's 3:09 AM. I'm in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England. It's July 15th, 1944. My name is Will Graham.” He panted, repeating it over and over until he stopped shaking, until those words were all that was left in his head.

Hannibal called them reality checks. They helped ease the transition from nightmare to reality, pulling his focus from his imagined terror and back into the real world, where there was nothing there to hurt him. Only Hannibal’s arms welcoming him back, protecting him from the monsters lurking in the dark shadows of his mind. Monsters haunted the real world too, but none compared to the evil ingrained in his mind. And Hannibal couldn't protect him beyond his skull. Instead, he protected him here, in reality.

Hannibal had taught him to do the reality checks after his first nightmare, the night after their consummation, and he had been getting better. Quicker. Part of him felt proud, and part of him thought it a foolish thing to be proud of. Proud of what? Proud of his ability to return to passing as a normal person after having a breakdown? Hardly something to brag about, hardly something to flaunt.

As his heart steadied its pace and he slowly began to return to normal, Will collapsed in his lover's arms, holding tight to the older man. He always did get tired after this part. Always wanted to collapse and return to his dreams, no matter how unsettling. He knew that Hannibal would be there to fight off the monsters with his bare hands if he needed him to. Hannibal pulled him down, pulling him into the warmth of his chest as sleep started to wash back over the two of them.

"What did you dream about this time?" Hannibal inquired, though Will knew that he already knew the answer. He asked every time, and every time, he got the same answer.

"Bella." Will mumbled.

"We'll find her killer… She will be laid to rest and the nightmares will stop." Hannibal assured, just in the same way that he did every time. Will began to wonder if they were empty promises, every day leading nowhere, but the way that he said it, Will almost believed him.

He nuzzled tighter into him as Hannibal wrapped the blankets around his shoulders, holding him tightly, doing all he could to make him feel safe. Will pressed his nose into the older boy's chest, inhaling the scent of him, never failing to bring him peace. Will smiled softly, sleepily, his darkest fears subsiding for the night.

"How come we call her that?" Will mumbled sleepily.

"What's that?"

"You told me when we met that you painted the graffiti everywhere. Why do you call her Bella?"

"Because that's her name."

Will didn't ask what that meant or how he knew. Instead, he just nodded, and drifted off to sleep.

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Will sifted through the files again, but nothing was sticking out. Hannibal had connections all over the world, as Will quickly learned, but his connections still only got them so far. He'd pulled some strings with a few friends in high places, had managed to get his hands on missing persons reports on every dark haired female between the ages of thirty and forty from seven different countries - England, France, Denmark, Lithuania, Spain, Romania, and even Germany.

They were flooded with files, scattered all throughout the library, had been flipping through them for weeks. But nothing fit.

Will was close to screaming as he tossed yet another file into the reject pile. His eyes were growing tired and his brain beginning to pound in his head. He buried his face in his hands, too frustrated to take this much longer. It had been months, and they'd gotten nowhere. It was slow, agonizing, and Will was losing faith fast.

"This is pointless." Will muttered, angrily swiping away the mess of files that surrounded him, letting them scatter, anything to get them out of his sight. It was as though everything that they had been struggling to do, everything that they had been working for, was all for nothing. Will was beginning to believe that maybe they would never find her killer. That they would search and search until their dying days and it would all be for nothing.
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“Now I wouldn't say that.” Hannibal objected, sliding down to the floor in front of him, reaching over and placing a hand on his knee. He handed him the near-empty Coke bottle that they’d been sharing all day, offering him the last drink, just as he always did on days leading nowhere. Will let out a sigh, leaning into him, melting into his touch before raising the glass bottle to his lips, downing the rest.

Sometimes days like these were infuriating, but sometimes simple gestures could make it better. The taste of stale pop on his tongue, offered as a gesture of comfort and good will. The feeling of fingers brushing absentmindedly through his dark curls. Small kisses pressed against his temple whenever Hannibal left the room. Rays of sunshine through an otherwise dark room.

“I think I may have found something that fits our timeline. We may have our Bella, Will.”

It was foolish, but every time Hannibal offered him a lead, Will’s heart still leaped from his chest, excitement in his bones. His eyes lit with fire again as he looked up at the older boy with anticipation.

“Clarabella Dronkers.” Hannibal announced, picking the file up out of his lap, snapping it open. “In 1941, she would have turned thirty-four. She's was the mother of two. Approximately five feet tall. Dark hair. She matches our description.” He explained, a certain light in his eyes. Will propped himself up on his knees, inching closer, unsure if he was drawn close by the information or the excitement in Hannibal’s voice.

“Now here's where it gets interesting. Our Clarabella was a German actress and cabaret singer. She, however, was later recruited as a spy under the Nazi party. It says here that she touched down in London in the January of 1941, and was supposed to make radio contact but was never heard from again. Dead silence.” Hannibal explained.

Will tried to picture her in his mind’s eye. A pretty woman, with dark hair and bedroom eyes, singing like a siren, luring men to their watery graves. A black widow. Will had failed to imagine Bella as anything more than an innocent victim, but perhaps she wasn't. Perhaps she had seduced the wrong man, made a grab at the wrong information. She was a Nazi spy, after all. It didn't make her death any less unjust, but perhaps a bit more understandable. Her life as sacrifice for the millions of lives her kind had taken.

“My theory is that she came across someone’s path in the following year. Someone who didn't care much for Nazis, which could be anyone. Her cover was blown, and she was held hostage, and finally murdered.” Hannibal theorized. “It could fit. Clarabella *fits.”*

Will let out a breath, eyes wide as a smile stretched over his lips. Hope filled him again, and suddenly he was happy again - not because of the dead girl, but at last, she had a name beyond *Bella.* They had a lead, they had a case, they had something that they could work with for the first time in weeks.

He couldn't resist. Hannibal had given him so much in so few words, and he couldn't resist. He leapt onto him, pouncing like a cat in heat, pinning him to the floor beneath him and claiming his lips, holding him tight. He could feel the older boy smiling against his lips, tossing the file aside and pushing his hands through his curls. He could feel Hannibal begin to squirm - he liked to be on top, in control at all times, but Will held him down, kissing him hard, keeping him against the floor.

His lips were warm and familiar and perfectly fitted against his own. He was used to kissing him like this, had done it half a million times since they had come together as one, but the thrill in his

chest never went away. This was life now, and nightmares and dead ends aside, Will was growing to love something for the first time in his life. His life had been filled with so much disappointment and pain that he had never been able to love it for what it was. But life didn't hurt now. He dropped by his own home every now again to let his dad know that he was okay, but his life was spent in these four walls, alongside Hannibal. There was no one left to hurt him, no one left to scream, no one left to tell him he was worthless. Hannibal gave him a life. A real life.

“You think this could be our Bella?” Will asked excitedly, eyes alight with newfound hope. Newfound wonder.

“Well, we’ll have to do some more digging, but I think that we may have a chance.”

Will smiled and kissed him again, fiercely, ferociously, hungrily. Better days were coming. Better things were coming for him, he could feel it in his bones. There was a new world coming, just around the bend, the fractured, splintered pieces of the old one coming to an end. There was a new voice calling for him, beckoning him, growing stronger with each passing moment. The night was about the end and the day was going to break. As Hannibal turned him over and made love to him on the floor of his library, he could feel the sun beginning to rise.

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“Clarabella Dronkers was found in the summer of 1942.” Hannibal announced softly.

A week had passed since their victory, only to have it crashing down again. Will’s eyes darted up toward him, not wanting to believe what he had been told. He slowly sat down her file, the same file that he had been flipping through for days, no matter how futile the effort. He flipped through the two page report, settled on the idea that she was their Bella. He had searched for meaning in the words until they were burned into the backs of his eyelids. He had been convinced. Clarabella had to be their Bella, didn't she?

His eyes locked on Hannibal, searching for some sort of sign that this was just a sick joke, some inexplicable lie, but he remained stoic, staring down at him in quiet defeat. Hannibal wouldn't lie about something like this. Will’s heart stopped beating as he stared up at him, the world seeming to slow down as they were pushed back where they'd started. They were right back where they'd started, no closer than they'd been in April.

“What?” Will breathed, somewhere between shock and anger and devastation.

“I have friends, Will. Spies within the Nazi party. I got into contact, had them do some digging… She died in a hospital in Berlin in 1942. She's not our Bella.” He murmured remorsefully.

Slowly, Will rose to his feet, on shaking legs. His head felt heavy and fuzzy all at once, red burning inside of his skull. His entire body shook with rage. Angry that he had gotten his hopes up, angry that he had let himself follow down another dead end, angry that Clarabella was not Wych Elm Bella. Angry that she had died thousands of miles away in Berlin instead of here.

“You're sure?” Will said quietly, rage barely contained between clenched teeth.

“Certain.”

Will nodded slowly, rage contained behind brittle prison bars, ready to snap at any moment. Slowly, he leaned down, picking up Clarabella’s file, flipping it open and eyes skimming through it again,
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though he found it impossible to read, vision blurring with red. Just red. Red, hot fury.

He let out a scream as he chucked the file across the room, the sound of paper against wall not nearly as satisfying as he had hoped. Screams and shouts and growls of anger erupted from his throat as he kicked hard at the heap of files in the floor, sending papers flying wildly about the room. He let them fly, let them get mixed up, let them go, because it wasn't as if any of them mattered anyways. It wasn't as if they were going to find Bella anyways.

“FUCK!” He cried out, kicking the files spread about the floor, destroying any evidence of the faux progress they'd made. It didn't matter how many people they ruled out if they never found the only one that mattered.

Hannibal watched from the corner, standing away from his path of destruction. He let him go, let him rage, let him fester and burn. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Will felt grateful, grateful that Hannibal didn't stop him from destroying the library as he moved toward the books that lined the walls, pulling them down roughly and tossing them into the floor. Will unleashed hell upon the room, like a tornado, like the wrath of god filled his veins as he screamed.

He was seething. He was furious. It was all pointless, all meaningless. Bella would forever be nameless beyond the name *Wych Elm Bella.* She would forever be faceless, no more than filthy bones and hollow eyes. She would forever be forgotten beneath the seas of dead men, only remembered by two hopeless boys desperate to play detective.

“Come here. Come here, *mažai detektyvas.”* He murmured as Will finally began to still, standing with a heaving chest and balled fists. He inched closer, slowly wrapping his arms around the younger man, pulling him into his chest, holding him close as he shook, struggling to maintain his footing.

And suddenly, his fingers were curled around Hannibal’s throat. Pinned beneath him in the same way he had been when Will had tackled him, kissing him for his joy. But there was no joy in him now, rather seething with rage and fury. The first time, Will had kept him down by the ferocity of his kiss, and now, it was the ferocity of his fists, keeping him pinned to the ground as his hands trembled, strangling him, draining the life from his dark eyes…

No…

He was *killing him.*

The only man that Will had ever loved was trapped beneath him as blind rage seethed from him, burning, boiling, scorching in his throat. He watched as the skin beneath his hands began to purple and bruise with the force of his hands. He felt the slamming of his pulse beneath his palms, beating hard as the oxygen was forced from his lungs. He felt sick, terrified…

Powerful…

Hannibal didn't protest as Will choked the life from him, didn't kick or scream or gasp for air. Rather, he lay still, just smiling up at him, like he was proud. Will’s eyes grew wide as he watched the color drain from his face, oxygen draining from his lungs as he lay beneath him. He wanted to stop, wanted to pull away and hold onto him for dear life, but he couldn't. His body worked against him, and he couldn't stop.

Will felt the life dissipating from beneath his fingertips, Hannibal slowly falling lifeless beneath him. The light began to fade from his open eyes, the pulse beating against his palm slowing to a halt. The only thing remaining was the vacant stare, and that wicked, twisted grin…

Will let out a shriek, pulling away and doubling in on himself. Hannibal stood where he had before, no longer lying dead in the floor. There were no bruises lining his neck, no eerie grin, no lifeless gaze, no evidence that anything had even happened. He just stood, watching as Will's eyes filled with tears, streaming down his face as he collapsed to his knees, hugging himself tightly as he struggled to breathe, lungs lit ablaze. *What was happening to him?*

"Will?" Hannibal breathed, kneeling in front of him, taking his face in his hands, thumb running over the bit of scruff that had grown there. His voice was quiet, hands gentle, as if he might break at any given moment. Will normally would've hated to be treated like such a fragile thing, but in that moment, that was what he was. Shivering. Silent. Fragile. "Where did you go, Will?"

"You were… And I was… And you're not…" He stammered out, trembling hard as Hannibal pulled him close, burying his face into his chest until Will felt like he could breathe again, held tight and comforted until he knew what was real again. He was going insane. Losing his mind, unsure of what was real and what wasn't. So he held tight to the one thing he knew to be real. "Something is wrong with me." He whimpered.

"Your name is Will Graham…" Hannibal began. Reality check.

"It's 6:32 PM. I'm in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England. It's July 23rd, 1944. My name is Will Graham." He recited like gospel, over and over, until he believed it.

They sat in silence, not needing words as Will buried his face into his chest, counting the heartbeats in his ribcage as they pounded against his ear. His heart was still beating, and that was all that mattered. He stayed until he was calm again, until the frazzled brain of a madman almost felt sane again.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind." Will whispered.

Hannibal pulled away slightly, holding the younger boy's hands against his chest. Will's eyes stayed trained on Hannibal's, letting the darkness take him in and swallow him whole. "Don't go inside, Will. You'll want to retreat." The older man murmured, fingers reaching up to brush his hair from his eyes. "Stay with me."

"Where else would I go?"

Hannibal pulled him close again, and Will buried his face into his chest, holding him close. The scent of him was intoxicating, filling his lungs until it was all that was left inside of his hollow bones. He felt the steady rise and fall of Hannibal's chest, falling in rhythm with his own. There was nowhere for him to go, nowhere for him to flee, nowhere for him to exist except here.

"I don't want to do this anymore." Will whispered. "I can't keep searching for Bella. I'm too tired, Hannibal. We're never going to find her."

Hannibal's fingers brushed through his curls, lips pressed against the top of his head, cradling him tightly, holding him close. "Then we stop. You can't lose your mind for a dead girl. To lose yourself for the justice of someone who will never appreciate it is a foolish thing to do."

Will sniffled, feeling weak, pitiful. He'd failed her, had been too weak to solve her case, too weak to avenge her, too weak to bring her justice. He wanted to forget again, wanted to bury her deep within the crevices of his mind, leave her with the unremarkable days and the nights spent listening to his father's drunken rants, wanted to leave her to fade away. He wished that he had gone somewhere else that day, or that he had climbed a different tree. He wished that he had never remembered.

“I just want to forget. All of it.” He murmured.

“Okay.” Hannibal nodded slightly. “I'll make you forget.”

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Will had fallen asleep in his arms, falling into the dreamless black as Hannibal cradled him. Nearly three hours had passed by the time he woke again, curled in the overstuffed chair that Hannibal liked to sit in when they were flipping through files in the library. Will had always taken to the floor, preferring to sit at his feet as Hannibal absentmindedly played with his hair. Now he lay curled there, waking slowly from his sleep.

The library was cleaner than it had been in weeks, all of the files neatly stacked away on the bookshelf, the books put back in their places. The fireplace roared despite the fact that it was July, and Hannibal sat in the chair opposite of him, thumbing through a book quietly. There was something so domestic about it, living this quiet existence. Will wondered if they would always be this way, rising and falling together…

“You're awake.” Hannibal remarked after a few moments.

“I am.” Will mumbled, slowly sitting upright, stretching his limbs.

“Good.” He replied, shutting his book and sitting it on the coffee table. “You should change clothes. Then I want you to meet me in the bedroom.”

He no longer spoke with a tenderness that made Will feel like he was fragile, rather speaking with a certain sternness in his voice, like a teacher to a student, or a father to a son. Like he expected to be obeyed. Will nodded and rose to his feet, unsure of what to expect, or whether or not he should be excited to find out. He stretched his limbs, cracking his back before turning toward the door, down to the hall bathroom. He figured he'd throw on one of Hannibal’s robes, not caring for much else.

“Use the master bathroom, please.” He called as Will started down the wrong way.

He didn't question. He'd learned that questioning was futile, that Hannibal would tell him exactly what he wanted him to know - nothing more and nothing less. Asking questions typically led nowhere, and he was too tired, so he obeyed, turning back toward the stairs and quickly heading up them, hearing Hannibal slowly rise from his chair behind him.

Will knew the house well now, walked through it like it was his own, which he supposed it was. He slept there every night, only left when it was necessary. He had no reason to go, not with Hannibal here. When he thought of home, it wasn't the place where he'd lived hidden with his father, or even Louisiana anymore. It was here. This was home.

He padded into the bathroom, tugging off his clothes, shrugging off his suspenders and trousers first, tossing them aside. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt, figuring that it would be rude to keep
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Hannibal waiting. If there was one thing that Hannibal hated, it was to be kept waiting. Soon, he stood naked in the bathroom, eyes darting around for a robe. Instead of it hanging on the door where it always hung, it was missing, replaced by something sitting folded on the counter.

Black lace. Will picked it up to find lacy black underwear, though it looked to be for a woman. Solid black at the top, though it turned to see-through, intricate lace patterns just above where his cock would hang between his thighs. Beside it sat a matching lace garter belt, two straps hanging down to clasp onto the stockings that sat on the counter. Black lace, just like everything else, intricate patterns woven into them.

Will's heart could have stopped beating in his chest as he stared down at them, marked only by a small note written in Hannibal's handwriting.

Put them on.

These were meant for a woman. Will gulped down hard, raising them in front of his face. Why would Hannibal want him to wear these? He wasn't a girl, Hannibal knew that. He was a boy, he was a boy, but Hannibal wanted to see him dressed like a girl. He gulped down hard, some amount of shame rising from the pit of his belly, even more as his cock began to stiffen at the thought.

He forced himself to stop thinking. Hannibal wouldn't hurt him, always knew how to make him come, even in ways he wouldn't expect. There had been days - long days spent in the library - when Hannibal had reached into his pants without a word, had slowly fingered him open until he came undone in his trousers. He had pushed his face into the bed and tied his hands behind his back, fucking him until he came untouched. Hannibal was always a good lover, in the most peculiar of ways, ways he'd never expected. This was just another surprise.

Slowly he tugged on the lace, finding that he liked the airy feeling between his legs, though the lace did little to conceal the outline of his cock. The waistband started just above his bellybutton, and it hung loosely at the beginning of his thighs. It would have been promiscuous on a woman, but on a man, on *him,* it was so much more scandalous. Men ought not wear what was meant for a woman, but something about it gave him a thrill in the pit of his belly. Like he was doing something wrong, something dirty.

Inhaling slowly, he slipped on the garter belt before tugging on the lace stockings, rolling them gently up to just above his knees, careful not to rip them. He fastened the straps, securing them in place before turning to himself in the mirror. He looked strangely androgynous in a way that he almost liked. Too masculine to be a woman, but too feminine to be a man. He fell somewhere in the middle. Part of him felt insecure, knowing that this was wrong, but part of him liked the naughtiness of it.

Slowly, he slipped out of the bathroom to find Hannibal standing in the center of the room. He wore a suit, one that made him look sophisticated, professional, looming above him. He held a rope between his hands - Hannibal had tied him up before, but not with rope, not like that. Will stared up at him, taking a small step closer, immediately feeling self conscious, unworthy to be in his presence.

"You told me that you wanted to forget." Hannibal stated, voice almost clinical, no warmth to be found. No praise, no warmth, nothing but objective fact that made him yearn for the affection he was so often shown. "I'm going to do just that. If you let me."

Will stared up at him with big blue eyes, tongue running over his lips before nodding. Anything if it meant forgetting Bella for the night.

“I'm going to tie you up. Not in the way I've done before. This time, your entire body will be bound and you will not be able to move. Your entire focus will be on me, and me alone. I want your entire existence to fade into me. Your only thought will be of me. I will know if your mind wanders. Do you understand?” He stated, commanded. There were no quiet *do you trust me’*s this time, because he already knew he did. Will already knew the rules.

“I understand.”

“Good boy. On your knees.”

Will gulped down his nervousness and put all his faith in the older man as he fell to his knees like a man to prayer. He watched as Hannibal examined him for just a moment, circling him like a predator about to devour his prey. Will inhaled as he slowly bent down, slowly beginning to tie him down. Arms trapped behind his back, legs pulled slightly apart. He moved with purpose, precision, binding him tightly, quickly, efficiently. The rope came over each shoulder, converging in a knot over his chest before leading down to the outline of his stiffened cock, growing ever tighter against the lace, before parting and tying around his thighs, securing them apart as he sat steadily on his knees, unable to move a muscle. Completely at Hannibal’s control.

“I'm going to blindfold you now.” Hannibal said. It wasn't a question, it was a statement. All Will had to do was say no and it all would stop, the younger man always having the final say, but he didn't object as the familiar red satin tied tightly around his eyes. Will savored the feeling, the darkness taking him as every other sensation lit like a fire. The sound of Hannibal’s breathing, the smell of of his skin, the brush of his fingertips…

“I am going to fuck your throat until I come.” He stated. There were no questions, but the lack of regard for his wants had him leaking. There was something about Hannibal taking control over him that made him hard, made him want more. “I want you to focus. Focus on controlling your gag reflex. Keep in mind that you will be punished if you vomit - these shoes are Italian leather. Focus on breathing, when you can. Your opportunities to do so will be few, so take advantage of each of them.”

Hannibal leaned close to him, so close that his breath tickled his skin, so close that he could feel the ghost of his lips over his own. His hand pushed through his curls, lacing through them and pulling hard, baring his neck as he let out a small gasp. He felt Hannibal’s lips graze over the pale flesh of his neck, holding him close. “And most importantly… Focus on me.”

Will let out a shuddered breath as Hannibal pulled away, pulling himself back up. He heard the unzip of his slacks and could hear the fabric rustle as he pushed it aside, freeing his cock. Will could feel it mere centimeters from his face, could smell his arousal, the scent intoxicating. He wanted to look, wanted to watch as Hannibal freed his own length, wanted to watch it heavy and hard in his hand, wanted to watch the foreskin slide over the head before pulling down and slicking his shaft, pumping himself before entering. But instead, the blind man was left to his fantasies.

He felt the slick head of Hannibal’s cock brush over his lips, the teasing damn near unbearable as he sat immobilized. He wanted so much to see him, admire him. Instead, he was left to his other senses. The musky smell of him, the taste of him as Hannibal slowly traced his lips with the head of his cock, the sound of his quiet breath. He wanted to taste him, wanted to feel him thrusting into his mouth, wanted every thought to be consumed by him.

“Open.”

Will obeyed eagerly, lips parting slightly as Hannibal pushed his cock past them. He stilled as the head came past his lips, not pushing any further, not thrusting fast and rough as he had been promised. Will didn't dare move, waiting until he was instructed. Will knew the rules. Follow orders, and he would be rewarded.

“Taste. We’re going to go gradually. I don't wish to hurt you. Not like this.” Hannibal explained.

Will didn't speak, didn't nod, only replied with the use of his tongue, slowly running it over the slit. Pre-cum had gathered there, wet and dripping into his mouth. It tasted earthy, sweet. He savored the taste, savored the feeling of the slick flesh on his tongue. He could faintly feel the rhythmic beat of his pulse in his cock, throbbing against his tongue.

“Good boy.” Hannibal praised quietly before allowing himself the satisfaction of thrusting into his damp warmth. Will focused on the timing of his thrusts, shallow and short at first, growing faster with each thrust, pushing deeper each time, giving him time to adjust to the feeling. Will’s cock ached between his legs, trapped beneath the lace. His mind ceased its relentless thinking, Bella fading away into Hannibal, nothing but Hannibal. The taste of his skin, the growing ferocity of his thrusts, pushing deeper until he settled in the back of his throat.

Will’s eyes clenched shut as he willed himself not to gag. Hannibal’s cock was thicker than he had realized, not fully appreciating it when it was sheathed inside of him. But in his mouth, he could feel every single inch, jaw sore as he struggled to accommodate his length. He couldn't breathe, his cock pressing against the back of his throat, cutting off his airway. His mind was blank, lightheaded and dizzy.

Hannibal slowly pulled back, giving him a single moment to breathe before thrusting in again. He set a brutal pace, his thrusts short and minute as he fucked against his throat. Will’s head was light, every other thought pushed from his mind. Hannibal’s cock heavy in his mouth, pressing against his throat, the timing of his thrusts and the timing of his breaths. It was as though his entire existence was simply to be Hannibal Lecter’s fuck toy, both of his holes there for him take whenever he pleased…

Will could have drowned in the noises he made, the possessive growls and pleasured moans. He sounded hungry, animalistic as he rutted into his mouth. He could have suffocated in the scent of him, the taste of him, warm and musky and earthy and familiar. Will let out a moan, humming around his cock, arousal and satisfaction settling in his belly.

“Very good, Will, very good.” Hannibal moaned, debauched in his praise. “You're doing so well. Such a good boy.” His fingers laced rough through his curls, tugging hard as his thrusts picked up speed. Will felt his cock leaking, dampness spreading through the lace as it clung to his cock. “I'm going to come. You're going to swallow my seed.”

Will let out a quiet moan as Hannibal slammed himself deep into his mouth, pressing against the back of his throat as he stilled. He could feel the older man’s balls draw up tight against his chin, cock twitching against his tongue. Hannibal let out a moan above him, and Will imagined his face screwed up in pleasure, eyes clenched tightly, jaw slack as his orgasm washed over him. He felt the thick fluid spurt from the head of his cock, down the back of his throat. He swallowed, just as he was told, the warmth filling his belly and spreading through him as he moaned.

Finally, Hannibal pulled away, cock softening between his legs. Will slouched against the ropes, panting as he struggled to catch his breath. He could hear Hannibal tucking himself back into his slacks, remaining dressed, as though he weren't even worth the time it took to strip himself of his clothes. Will felt a bit of cum dribbling from the side of his mouth, certain that the sight of him was positively obscene. He was tied up, used, messy and degraded… Yet, his cock still ached from between his thighs, aroused by the humiliation. Peculiar thing.

“I see you enjoyed that. Offering up your mouth and throat to be fucked by my cock. I believe we have some fairly tangible proof of that.” He stated, commenting on the rigid state of his cock. Will gulped as he felt Hannibal kneel in front of him, lips grazing over his. Will exhaled slowly, swaying into his kiss. He wanted to reach up, push his hands through Hannibal’s hair, but couldn't, hands tied behind his back, unable to move without toppling over.

Slowly, Hannibal’s hands snaked down his body, settling over the hardened bulge in the lace. Slowly, he began to stroke him through the lace, massaging at his length. Will found himself breathless once again, panting and desperate for air as Hannibal touched him. There was something even more foreign about the touch know, lace against flesh unfamiliar and new. He strangled back a cry as he massaged at the head of his cock through the lace, pre-cum leaking copiously down his shaft as he trembled violently beneath his touch.

“You like it, don't you? Being nothing more than a place for me to cum. In your hole, in your mouth, wherever I please, whenever I please. You like being controlled. Owned. Don't you?” Hannibal breathed, voice gruff and possessive as he continued to rub circles into the head of his cock, earning a whine from Will’s lips.

“Y-yes.” Will stuttered out.

Hannibal stopped stroking, rather applying consistent pressure against the slit. Will gulped, desperate for more friction, his urge to thrust only stopped by his inability to. He gritted his teeth, head thrown back in his discomfort as he sought for breath. He was so close, so close, like he was standing on the edge and Hannibal was denying him his leap. Refusing him his orgasm.

“Yes, what?” Hannibal insisted.

“Yes sir, yes sir, please, sir.” He pleaded desperately. He knew that he liked to be called ‘sir’ whenever they were playing rough and dirty like this.

“Good boy.” He praised, finger working over his cock again, pleasure spreading through him. He let out a whine as Hannibal’s free hand reached up, clamping around a nipple and twisting, tugging and pulling at the sensitive nub. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, everything dissolving into the pleasure that Hannibal provided. “I'm going to make you come like this. I'm going to make you come apart in your clothes. Make you make a mess of yourself.”

Will knew that it would not be a difficult promise to keep. The lace, drenched with his fluid, rubbing against the most sensitive part of him, combined with the tortuous pinch and tug of Hannibal’s fingers… Will was coming apart beneath his fingertips, a quivering, moaning mess under the scrutiny of his touch.

“I can feel you, Will.” He murmured, hand finally releasing his nipple, tracing a path down his front before cupping around his balls as they drew tightly to his body. “I can feel you getting close.”

Will let out a tortured whine, nodding furiously. He could feel Hannibal's smirk as he began to stroke him in full, pumping furiously from over the drenched lace as he massaged his balls, pressing the lace patterns into his skin. He wanted to come, wanted to release, wanted to moan and writhe and fall into his touch. He was close, moments from his orgasm, moments from tumbling over the edge.

And suddenly, his hand was pressing tight over the base, pinning his cock down, restricting the flow, making sure that he was unable to come. Will let out a wrecked whine, dark curls thrown forward as he shook, struggling to thrust into his hand. Anything to regain friction. But he couldn't. He was stuck.

"Han…" He whined in protest.

"Ah." He warned, pushing tighter against his cock as Will let out a gasp.

"Sir..." He moaned, correcting himself.

"Good boy."

Hannibal reached up and ran his fingers through his curls, his very touch a reward in itself. Will's chest heaved, tugging against the ropes, pressing indentations into his flesh. Hannibal's breath burned hot against his ear as he leaned in closer, voice warm and breathy in his ear.

"Do you want to come, Will?" Hannibal murmured, the lines between devious and seductive beginning to blur, cock twitching hard between his thighs, leaking copiously down his shaft. There was no hiding it. Hannibal could feel his arousal, his want, his need, right in the palm of his hand.

"Yes, sir." He whispered.

"Earn it. Tell me what you are."

Will gulped, praying that the words would come. "I'm your… I'm your fuck hole." He whispered, cock leaking as Hannibal's grip began to loosen ever so slightly. "Your d-dirty boy." He didn't know why he liked it so much. He knew that he was loved by Hannibal, but there was something about being told that he meant nothing that made him crave it more. Maybe it was because of how his father had treated him. Years of feeling worthless always made him crave affection, attention. Perhaps that was why this made him hard. "I'm your whore."

Hannibal's grip had loosened, though he didn't stroke him, refused to offer any sort of pleasure. "You're forgetting the most important thing, Will. What are you?"

"I'm yours."

He could practically feel Hannibal's smile as he began to stroke him, fast, hard, until he came undone. He came with a shout, mind going blank and back arching hard as he came in his clothes. The pleasure took him like a hurricane. If there was one thing that he would never get used to, it was that. The pleasure spreading through his body, the throb and twitch of his cock, the tidal wave of sensation crashing over him…

"Good boy." Hannibal whispered as he began to come down, sleep grogging his mind as he sat, semen dripping from the holes in the lace into a messy puddle beneath him. "You've done so well for me."

Will felt him move away, heard him pad across the room as Will sat, swaying slightly as he dripped into the floor, cock softening between his legs. The sticky fluid clung to him, warm and wet against his thighs. He felt dirty, and some distant part of him wanted to change, clean off, but he mostly wanted to fall asleep. But he knew how this worked. It was damn near guaranteed that Hannibal wasn't through with him yet. The nights rarely ended with just one orgasm.

Will heard him return, stepping behind him, towering high above him. The smell of him, the feeling of his clothes occasionally brushing up against his skin, it had him swaying into his touch, wishing that he would just take him to bed, hold him as he drifted to sleep. But Hannibal didn't play that way. Cuddling, holding, the gentler sort, it never came until they were both satisfied.

Suddenly, something cold and sharp was pressing against the back of his neck, just above where his spine began, pressing hard against the bone, though not hard enough to split the skin beneath it. A blade. That was new. Hannibal had explained to him that pain could amplify pleasure, a statement he'd found to be true after a night of sex so rough that he found it difficult to sit straight for the following week. But the slamming of hips pounding rigorously against his own was a lot different than the cold edge of a knife…

“Do you know what this is?” Hannibal inquired.

“A knife?” Will guessed.

He felt Hannibal push the knife deeper into his skin. Enough to leave an indention, a red mark, but not enough to draw blood. A warning.

“Sir.” Will quickly added.

“Yes. Good. I'm going to cut you free, and you are going to do exactly as I say. Call it an exercise in trust.” He stated. “You are going to stay entirely still as I free you. If you disobey me, you will be punished. If you make a move, if you so much as flinch…” Pain split across the top of his back. The knife sliced cleanly, efficiently into his skin, Will groaning at the sting. “If you make a single sound.” Another burst of pain spread through him, just below the first. His back arched away as he let out a hiss of pain, despite Hannibal’s orders. “If I sense your mind beginning to wander.” Finally, a third stripe was marked across his back, just beneath the second. Will's fingernails dug into his palms as he felt the blood beginning to trickle down his back. “You will be punished. Is this understood?”

He said it differently this time. It was as though he was asking for permission, like he wouldn't continue if he didn't have his explicit consent. Will let out a breath, savoring in the sting and burn in his back. They weren't deep enough to scar, but until they healed, he would be marked, owned by Hannibal Lecter. He wouldn't mind having a few more stripes, he supposed.

“Yes, sir.”

He could feel Hannibal smiling down at him as he knelt down, pulling the blade beneath the rope, blade cold against his skin. His eyes shut tight as he held his position, rigid as a statue. Slowly, the tip pressed into his skin as he pulled up, rope snapping against the edge. Will exhaled slowly as Hannibal moved to the other shoulder, snapping the rope there in the same way, Will frozen in place, not so much as daring to breathe.

Hannibal moved down to his legs, pressing the blade against his inner thigh, frighteningly close to his cock. The danger of it had his cock threatening to harden again, something arousing about the

press of a knife. Will gulped down hard as he pulled at the rope, sawing until it snapped. At the sound of the rope breaking so close to his most sensitive area forced his muscles to tighten, flinching hard.

"Tsk, tsk, Will. I warned you. You are not to move." Hannibal scolded. Without so much as a warning, Hannibal pushed the blade hard into the sensitive flesh of his inner thigh. He exhaled sharply, biting back a noise, whether it be a noise of pain or pleasure he was unsure. How wrong, how dirty it was, the feeling of blood trickling down his thigh having him straining against his soiled panties.

"Good boy." He praised. "You take your punishment very well." He felt a hand cup around his bulge, cock half hard already. "Very well indeed." He teased. Will gulped down hard, struggling to stay still as he bent down, hand moving away from his sex as he returned to the task at hand.

Slowly, he moved down the one leg, and up the other, rope snapping each time, until he reached the top. He began to tug at the rope, pulling it out between his legs, beneath his dripping cock, until it frayed and snapped. His semen dripped from the lace and onto the cool metal, making a mess of his blade.

"Well… Look at this. You've made a mess." Hannibal chuckled quietly, raising the knife, messy and dripping with Will's cum.

"What?" Will inquired, blind eyes wide beneath the silk, voice laced with fear and arousal at the idea of further punishment.

"Open your mouth. Tongue out." Hannibal instructed.

Will reluctantly obeyed, unsure of what he was meant to be expecting. He opened his mouth, only to be met by the taste of metal and semen. The blade pressed against his tongue, slowly pulling it down as his own semen wiped off onto his tongue, the taste of himself overpowering. Will swallowed as Hannibal pulled the knife away, the taste of himself lingering in his mouth. There was something filthily arousing about it, something so *wrong.* Will had been raised Catholic, and though Hannibal was the only god he prayed to now, he'd been told that seed was not to be spilled unless they were actively trying to conceive. This, this was so far from that, god must have been damning them to hell where they sat.

"Messy boy. Made a mess of my knife. I think we ought to clean you up." Hannibal suggested before offering a devious smile. "Onto the bed."

Will felt his hands tuck beneath him, pulling him to his feet, onto shaking knees, before guiding him to the bed, sprawled out across the sheets like a feast to be devoured. Will eased onto the sheets, sinking into the familiar silk as Hannibal towered over him, stealing a kiss from the younger man. His hands ghosted down his sides, pressing down into his hip, making his erection known. Will was aching between his thighs, letting out a small moan as he pushed back against the older man.

"Spread your legs." Hannibal ordered.

Will did as he was told, presenting himself for the older man as he slowly moved between them. Will could feel his breath hot against his cock, warmth spreading through him as Hannibal's mouth pressed against him, sucking through the lace. Will let out a whimper as he began to suck him dry,

cleaning the mess that he'd made of himself. Will's cock twitched hard as it filled with blood, swelling and throbbing as Hannibal continued suckling at his length.

"Please." Will begged, pleaded, needing more than his endless teasing. One word, begging for release, one word being all that he could manage to get out.

He could feel Hannibal's satisfied smirk pressed against him as he sucked through the lace, leaving him squirming with oversensitivity and need, until he had swallowed each drop of semen that had clung to the lace. Will moaned, back arching sharply, dark curls thrown back as Hannibal moved away.

"Tell me what you want, Will." He murmured.

Will gulped down hard, tongue running over his lips. "I want… I want your cock inside of me. I want you to fuck me." He confessed. He paused a moment before finally deciding to confess, knowing that hiding anything was simply an exercise in futility. What had he to hide from the only man who knew him so intimately? "I want you to fuck me in my clothes."

He could hear Hannibal let out a satisfied hum before reaching over, returning with the lubrication. He felt him pushing away the panties, pulling them to the side as he slipped his fingers past. He felt the familiar cold, slick graze of his fingers, causing his hole to contract and his cock to throb, his body reacting to the touch, knowing what was to come.

"Like this?" He teased, pressing a finger past his rim, no longer taking much time at all to open him up. His body knew to relax, knew to open to Hannibal's touch, knew how to take what was given to him. Will let out a shuddered sigh, rocking into his touch, finding comfort in the feeling of being filled.

"Yes, sir." He moaned, nearly crying out as his finger brushed against his prostate.

Hannibal pushed in a second finger, easily scissoring him open, body pliant and open to his touch. Will lay moaning, panting as he massaged at his prostate, gripping at the sheets as he struggled to breath. Dirty lace had his cock pinned down, hard and leaking against pale flesh as he rocked hard against Hannibal's fingers.

"Naughty boy… So hungry for my cock, you can't even wait long enough to take off your clothes. My naughty boy… My filthy little cockslut." He mused, lips pressing against his hip bone through the fabric as he massaged at his prostate, watching him squirm beneath his relentless touch. "Tell me you want it. Tell me that you want my cock inside of you."

"I want it." He whined, voice desperate and barely composed, chest heaving as he begged. "I want your cock inside of me. *Please, sir, give me your cock."* He was pathetic and filthy and desperate in his pleasure, pleading for things that one does not typically hear of in civilized conversation. But he didn't need to be civilized, not with Hannibal pinning him to the bed, fingering him through his clothes. Here, in their bed, Will was feral, reduced to primal need. In their bed, Will was reduced to nothing more than Hannibal Lecter's whore.

Hannibal unsheathed his fingers from his body, rather wrapping roughly around his hip and pulling him onto his stomach, cock pressed into the mattress. The older man roughly guided him into position, propping him on his knees with his ass presented in the air for him, waiting to be mounted and fucked.

He wanted to see him in all his glory, but instead, he remained blind, knowing nothing more than the sound of his zipper, doing nothing more than pulling his cock out, not bothering with undressing. Will buried his face into the pillow beneath him as Hannibal pushed his cock against his rim, tracing the tight ring of muscle with the slick head of his cock. Hannibal liked to tease, liked to make him wait just long enough for the desperation to settle in his bones before giving him what he needed. It wasn't until Will was trembling and grasping at the sheets that he finally pushed in, offering the relief he needed.

He was full to bursting, the older boy's cock leaving him filled with *him,* like everything else had been hollowed out and replaced with Hannibal Lecter. All of the nightmares, the sleepwalking, the moments when he didn't know what was real and what wasn't. All of it had been replaced by Hannibal.

He pulled slowly from the hilt until all that was left inside of him was the head before slamming in again, drawing a sharp cry from his lips as he grasped for the sheets, anything to hold onto. He slowly began to thrust, delivering deliberate, pointed thrusts into him, each one slamming against his prostate. His mind seemed to short-circuit, everything all too overwhelming as his thrusts began to pick up speed.

"Naughty boy… You love being fucked by me. Being entirely at my mercy, entirely at my disposal. You're addicted to my cock. You love being my whore." Hannibal whispered, breath hot against his ear, igniting the arousal in his belly, burning hot as pre-cum seeped into the soiled lace. "Say it. Out loud" He whispered. "You won't come until you say it."

"I love it." He whimpered, burying his face into the pillow as Hannibal continued to plow into him.

"Specifics." He grunted, slamming hard into him.

"I love… I love your cock. I love… I love being your, *ah, ah, Han… I love being your whore."* He cried out, head thrown back in his pleasured agony, each thrust delivered into him drawing him closer to his release.

"Good boy…" Hannibal murmured, thrusting furiously as he cupped a hand around his cock, massaging through wet lace. *"Geras berniukas, neklaužada berniukas…"*

Will moaned at words that he couldn't understand, bucking into his touch, balls drawing up tight against his body. Suddenly all that existed was the relentless pleasure wracking through his body, the feeling of fullness, and the slamming of his heartbeat inside of his ribcage.

"Come for me, Will. Come for me." He breathed, the sound of his breath blowing hot against his flesh finally pushing him over the edge.

He came hard, ruining the lace all over again. He cried out in his pleasure, unable to strangle them as he bucked into his touch, hole eagerly contracting around the older man's cock. Suddenly, there was nothing but pleasure rolling through him, pulsing in his veins as he lay floating through the dark.

Floating as Hannibal came deep inside of him, seeding his pink, abused hole. Floating as he lay whispering sweet nothings in a language he didn't understand. Floating as he unsheathed his softening cock from his leaking hole. Floating as he slipped down between his legs. Floating as he cleaned him with his tongue, sucking semen through the lace until he was squirming with oversensitivity. Floating, floating, somewhere far away. Just… floating.

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“Do they hurt?” Hannibal inquired, running a cold rag over the marks in his back. He'd already treated the one against his thigh, and had moved to the ones against his back, the ones that had been used as a warning, gently cleaning away the blood.

“Not really.” Will replied, rocking against him sleepily, still groggy from his orgasm, unsure of whether he was awake or asleep. He felt the wash rag slowly drag over his back, cloth gently cleaning away blood, Hannibal’s fingers gentle over his skin. He was struggling to stay awake, but he didn't mind it much, in love with moments like these. When there was no Bella, when there was no fear, when there was nothing but the two of them.

“Good.” Hannibal replied with a small smile before lowering the younger boy's shirt, moving away slightly. “I don't want to hurt you. Not really. Not truly. I can't say that you aren't gorgeous in your agony, though.” Hannibal turned to him, pushing away a stray curl. “A masterpiece.”

Will gave a small smile, leaning in and stealing a soft kiss. The sex was mind blowing, sure, but this was his favorite. Laying together in the library floor until Will fell asleep and Hannibal carried him off to bed. Will shifted until he was sprawled across his floor, face resting in Hannibal’s lap. He let out a contented sigh as the older boy's hands began to rake absentmindedly through his curls.

“You know I never mean the things I say to you, yes?” Hannibal inquired, fingers playing with his hair as Will struggled to keep his eyes from drifting closed. “You know how much I cherish you, don't you? How much you mean to me?”

“I know…” Will murmured sleepily. “I like it when you call me those names though.” He let out a loud yawn. “They're dirty. They make me hard.”

He could feel Hannibal smirking down at him. Will yawned again. He was too tired for any remnants of sex to be brought up again, too tired for the chance of another round, ready to collapse as he snuggled closer.

“Will you read to me?” Will whispered.

He heard a small chuckle drawn for his lips, and a nod. Will watched as he reached for the nearest book he could find, though the moment he began reading sent chills running through his spine. Running and bone and mud and haunting clung to the words in those pages. The sound of footsteps and the slamming of his heart inside of his chest were burned into that book. Silly thing to deem it cursed, but...

“Far over the misty mountains cold… To dungeons deep and caverns old…”

Something Wicked

He was running. The ground was unstable around him, wet and slipping beneath his bare feet. His chest burned as he struggled to breathe, but he didn't slow down. Didn't dare slow down. If he slowed down, he would be caught. He could hear them, the footsteps behind him. She was following him. Chasing after him. He didn't see her, hadn't caught a glimpse, but he knew that it was her. It had to be her.

He was running through Hagley Wood. He hadn't come past the edge since finding her, but here he stood, feet slamming against the muddy ground. He struggled to stay upright, struggled to keep running like his life depended on it, lest she catch him and drag his soul to hell. Drag his soul to the fiery depths to burn for eternity. Damned to eternal suffering if he didn't *keep running.*

He could hardly see. The sky was dark with clouds overcast, rumbling with thunder as they threatened to burst, give way to the storm that would surely drown him. He darted through the trees as quickly as he could, though each step felt a little slower, sinking a little lower, dragging him in under until the earth threatened to swallow him whole. Still, he'd crawl if he had to, claw his way out as the footsteps drew nearer and nearer.

And suddenly, he was falling, knees hitting against the soft earth. He tried to stand, but to no avail, each attempt bringing him down again. Lightning split across the sky, giving him one moment of clarity before the dark claimed the earth again. The Wych Elm, towering up above him, just as he had always known it. Looming, ominous. Will stared in horror at the tree, seeing them there again, peering from the darkness, burning through blackness thick as ink. Red eyes, staring furiously back at him, burning a hole straight through his chest.

"Will…" She hissed, calling to him, beckoning him closer. His eyes fixated on her, caught in her trance, watching as she slowly stepped into the light. She moved as a ghost, with strange, jerky movements, seeming to waver between life and death as she inched from her tree and into the light. There was no light, but it was as though she emitted her own, burning pale white through the inky darkness. She was little more than skin and bones, pale, translucent skin clinging to her skeleton. Her dark hair moved almost like she was underwater, whipping around her head like a halo as she drew closer to him.

Fear struck through his bones as he stared up at her, skeletal fingers reaching down to brush the side of his face. For a moment, Will feared that she would reach down, curl her fingers around his neck, tighten until he couldn't hope for breath, until the air left his lungs. But she didn't. She touched him like a mother would touch her child, gently, with a certain lovingness that Will had never known.

He heard the thunder rolling in the distance as he stared up at her. Beneath the roll of thunder, he could hear the footsteps that he had been running from, coming closer. *If it hadn't been Bella… Who was coming after him?* His heart began to slam against his ribcage as he stared up at her, eyes begging her to save him. But why would she? He had abandoned hope, had given up on her? Why would she save the boy who had failed to give her justice? Why save the boy who had failed to avenge her?

"Something wicked this way comes, William. He lurks closer than you may think." She whispered. "Something wicked looms over you. Something very wicked indeed."

Will wanted to beg for answers, unsure of what it meant. But he couldn't will his vocal chords to move, rather just staring up at her with a pleading look, praying that she knew. But instead, as lightning cracked across the sky, she vanished. As lightning cracked across the sky, the footsteps stopped. As lightning cracked across the sky, a heavy hand clasped around his shoulder.

The wicked something coming this way had arrived. Something very wicked indeed.

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Will woke to Hannibal shaking him awake. He was sitting upright. His throat was sore, burning like fire, and the screaming still rung in his ears. Another nightmare, another terror, though this one felt worse than the others. It left him with a sickened feeling in the pit of his stomach, like he had just received a death omen. It wasn't like a normal dream, with red eyes burning back at him until he woke in a cold sweat. This was different. This was a message. This was a warning.

Hannibal was reciting it over and over. *Your name is Will Graham. It's 6:03 AM. You are in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England. It's August 22nd, 1944. Your name is Will Graham.* But Will couldn't bring himself to listen. Instead, he sat with a thousand mile stare, unsure of what to say, or do. Something wicked loomed over him. Something wicked was coming to steal his soul.

“Will…” Hannibal breathed like a prayer, like he feared that his young lover had wandered too far into the dark this time, that he'd gone too far and was never coming back. Will’s eyes slowly found Hannibal’s, acknowledging him in full. The older man’s hand cupped his cheek, clinging to him like he was afraid he may slip away from him again. Will normally would have melted into his touch, but he found himself still this time, cold as ice, chilled to the bone.

Still, the more he touched, the closer he held him, the more Will began to ease into him. Hannibal pulled him close into his chest, and slowly, his arms began to pull around him. The scent of him was intoxicating, drawing him back to safety, bringing him back to reality.

They had spent the past month living in blissful domesticity. The pile of missing person files sat on a shelf collecting dust. They didn't speak of her, pushed her from their minds, the only remnants of bed being in the shadows of the night, when he woke screaming with his nightmares. She faded back into the walls when the sun rose again. But now, she was slamming in the forefront of his mind, and suddenly the dead girl that he'd found in the tree so many lifetimes ago was the only thing that mattered.

“Where did you go, Will?” Hannibal murmured, fingers brushing through his curls. He asked that a lot, whenever he was trying to call him back from the moments of dissociation. This didn't feel like dissociation though. It felt real, all of it so vivid and painful in the forefront of his mind and the caps of his knees.

“We have to find him.” Will murmured, fingers threading through his chest hair and tugging lightly, holding to him like an anchor. He buried his face into his chest, trying to drown himself in the scent of him.

“Who?” Hannibal inquired, pulling the boy slightly, meeting his blue eyes in some attempt to bring clarity to them. Clearly he was delusional, clearly he needed to be brought back. Will gritted his teeth, pushing away the intrusive thoughts of his own insanity as he met his familiar dark eyes through the first days of morning light.
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“We have to find him. He's coming after me. I know it, I can feel it. He's coming for me. I'm next, Han, we have to find him.” He rambled panickedly, clawing his way close until he could hold tight to the older man, cling tightly to the only anchor that he had ever had. The only anchor that had ever tethered him firmly to life, rather than letting him float dully through the void between life and death, through the gray between dazzling light and eternal darkness.

“Who do we have to find, William?” Hannibal begged, hand running lightly up and down his back in an attempt to soothe him as the anxiety wracked through him.

“Bella’s killer.”

It was the first night he'd said her name aloud since his meltdown, since the night of knives and rope, since the night that Hannibal had consumed his every thought. They didn't speak of her, not anymore, opting to focus on more pleasant things in life. Hiding away from the rest of the world, hiding from the war, from his father, from their dark and troubled pasts. Hiding away from the thing that had brought them together to begin with, the thing that had driven Will deeper into madness.

And now he was bringing her back into the light.

Perhaps it was a nightmare, perhaps it was a warning, perhaps it was a death omen. Perhaps it was all of the above. But there was one thing that had solidified inside of Will’s mind, one thing that would not be so easily shaken. He couldn't keep hiding from her. He couldn't keep hiding from the truth.

“We have to find the man who put Bella down the Wych Elm.”

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The fireplace was crackling despite the warmth of August. Fireflies lit up the air outside of the window as twilight fell over the trees, and Will could hear chirping in the distance. Hannibal sat reclined in the library chair, sipping at his tea, book open in his lap, though his eyes followed the younger boy as he dug a rut into the carpet as he paced along the same path he'd been pacing all day.

He didn't speak much. Instead, he burrowed himself deep into his mind, silently pacing, barely acknowledging it whenever Hannibal said something, whether it be him begging him to sit, or asking if he was hungry. He buried himself deep within himself, begging for some connection to come, something to rise in him.

“We need to figure out her killer. Need to find him, then we find her.” Will mumbled as he continued to wear a trench into carpet, pacing more furiously. “It's too impersonal. It’s clinical. Ritualistic. I don't think he knew her. Or maybe he didn't care about her. It wasn't someone who he had any significant connection to, or, or… He saw her as below him. He saw her as less than. He didn't feel anything for her.”

Will wrung his hands nervously, praying for some sort of sign, for some sort of answer beyond the blurry pieces of him that he got from the evidence. His heart slammed in his ribcage as his hands pressed against his temples, digging into the corners of his mind as he struggled to find *something.*

“Goddammit, I don't *know.”* He hissed, infuriated with himself for not being able to figure this out. “Maybe it was Chilton. He hates everyone. Hates whenever anyone comes on his property. Shot
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Tommy Willetts in the leg one time. Maybe he killed her." It was a stretch, Chilton being old and frail, but it was all that he could come up with.

"You and I both know that's not the answer. Anyone could figure that out. He's an old man. He didn't do this." Hannibal sighed, calling him back into the reality of the situation as he sipped at his tea. "Whoever did this was… Young. Young enough to carry her into the hollow of the tree."

"Then maybe we have a cult. You said yourself that now would be the best time to start one. Hard to draw attention with the war going on. They could fly beneath the radar. No one would know." Will suggested hopelessly.

"Bella's murder doesn't fit with any known sacrificial rituals. And she's the only one. Cults don't work with few. They'd have murdered someone else by now."

"Then… Then…" He let out a frustrated shout, reaching up and knocking off a row of books from the shelf, watching them clatter to the floor. The sound was satisfying, but it didn't help. He picked up speed, pacing all the more furiously, trying to force a theory into his head, but nothing was coming. Whoever had killed Bella was going to get away with it. Whoever had killed Bella was going to come for him next.

"Will…" Hannibal murmured, rising from his chair, sitting his tea and his book onto the coffee table before stepping toward him, into his well-worn path.

"Hmm?" He hummed, looking up at him for the first time in hours. The very sight of him brought some ease, dark eyes swallowing him whole, easing him into familiar darkness.

"Will, you're intent on finding her killer now? After all this time putting her behind us, you want to resume our search for her killer? Yes?" He confirmed softly.

"I have to, Han. I can feel it. I don't know how and I don't know why, but Han, I can feel it. In my bones, in my veins. I can feel it. I can feel him closer to me. He's coming for me." Will whispered, eyes brimmed with tears.

"Then we find him." Hannibal resolved, offering him a small smile. "We avenge her. Offer her justice." He ran a thumb over the line of his jaw. "Noble, you are, *mylimasis.* Noble indeed."

Will gave him a weak smile, unconvincing as they stood there. He was too tired to be convincing. Too shattered, too broken, everything aching in him.

"I notice something about you. Your imagination. Your empathy. I see it during sex, the way you anticipate my next move, bend to my touch without a word. Since meeting you, you've displayed great amounts of empathy. But your mind is running wild. You need to focus."

"I'm *trying."* Will insisted.

"No. You're holding distance. Fearing drawing too close. You remain objectivity. But your objectivity is costing you. You need to let your borders fall. You need to let your lines blur." Hannibal replied. Will watched as he fished something from his pocket. A shiny, gold chain, a matching golden pendulum swinging freely at the end. A pocket watch.

Hannibal raised the watch in front of his eyes, letting it swing whichever way it pleased as Will stared with intrigue. "Focus on the chain. Focus on the swing of the pendulum. On the count of

three, let yourself go. Will Graham will cease to exist and you will fade into the man who killed Bella. There will be nothing but his design." One hand pulled back the pendulum, holding it still. "Wade into your darkness, Will. I will be the lighthouse to guide you home. Do you trust me?"

He hesitated. And nodded.

"Good boy. Now just follow the pendulum swing."

He let go, and let the gold chain swing.

One…

Two…

Three…

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He felt warmth draining from his body. Not physically, but any warmth of emotion suddenly slipped into the earth. There were hints of it, like he'd almost known it, but never in its full. He'd never known love, or joy, or peace in its full. He'd ever only known glimpses, fading each time. Nothing stuck. Nothing stayed.

"I felt something for her. Or, I thought that I did. But she… She betrayed me. It… It hurt, but not in the way that it should have. My own emotions frightened me, so I shut them off, refused to let them control me." Will murmured. He could feel it, making leaps that he himself hardly understood. How did it suggest contained rage rather than emotionless sadism? He wasn't sure. But he *knew.*

Suddenly, he was standing amongst trees as he opened his eyes again. Twilight had fallen and the world was cloaked in dark blue as the sun faded into night. Hannibal stood to the side, watching with rapt attention as it all played out. In front of him stood a girl with dark hair flowing over her shoulders, a white, oversized night dress clinging limply to her thin form. Blue eyes stared blankly up at him, glassy, dead. She stood breathing, though, staring up at him.

"I deny myself any semblance of emotion. She's nothing more to me than… Than a piece of meat." Will murmured, circling her slowly. He felt nothing toward her, the girl who had been haunting his dreams for months now. He ran a tongue over his lower lip, digging into the mind of her killer. It was hard to dig into his mind, like defenses had been built to keep him out. What could be gathered from a pile of bones? But as he circled her, he became him. Was him. *He put Bella down the Wych Elm.*

"I lure her in. She trusts me, always has, despite what she's done to me. I pull her close to me." He reaches to her, curling an arm around her waist and holding her like a lover. Her eyes meet his, and for a moment, he could swear that she loved him. Still, there was nothing but frigid indifference in his bones. Nothing but the desire to destroy her. Leave her to rot where she lies.

"I hold her like a lover. Enough to make her drop her guard. Make her believe that I want her. That I want to make love to her. It's not until I've got her hypnotized and she's giving me bedroom eyes that I pull the knife."

He savored in the give of the blade as it pushed deep into her flesh, staring deep into her eyes as the shock and fear filled them. The warm gush of blood spilled between them, red staining his skin.
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Her blue eyes went wide and she let out a choked gasp. Will could feel her weaken beneath him as he held her up. Betrayed, jilted eyes stare up at him as her lip quivered.

“It is not a fatal wound. It is meant only to subdue. I let her fall to her knees as she cries out in pain, trying to stop the bleeding.” She was panicking beneath him, but there was nothing that she could do. He watched her struggle, watched her try to crawl away, but he pinned her down with his foot by her nightgown. He reached down, fingers threading through her hair as he pulled her into kneeling position. “I bind her tightly so that she can't move. She's mine to use. To subdue. To play with as long as I like.” The scratch of rope pressed into his palms as he used it to bind her. “I leave her hands free. I use the same blade to saw off her hand with surgical precision. The hand that guided me. The hand that betrayed me.” He could feel the blood ooze beneath his fingers as he sawed away at her wrist, until her hand lay limp in the dirt. She didn't deserve it. “Finally, I bind her hands in front of her, leaving her begging for mercy in the dirt in front of me.” He stared down at his handiwork, hands folded in front of him. “This is my design.”

He could feel Hannibal come closer to him, peering over his shoulder as he stood tall over the girl in the dirt, bound and crying. There was no fear in him, no disgust, no repulsion in what he had done to her. Instead, he stared like an artist staring at his work, proudly studying his masterpiece. He could feel Hannibal’s hands ghosting over his sides, his breath hot in his ear.

“Finish it.” He whispered, voice sounding like the devil’s, quiet and seductive, leading him into his temptation. Will let the blade in his hand clatter onto the soft earth beneath him as Hannibal replaced it with something else, easing it between blood-stained fingers. Red silk.

Will knelt in front of her as she stared at him with pleading eyes. He could see her lips moving, mouthing the word *‘please’,* but the only noise he could hear was the ringing in his ears, drowning out her cries and her pleas and the sound of the wind through the trees. All that was left was the buzzing as he pushed a hand through her dark hair, pulling her close, like a lover…

He tugged her hair back hard, mouth opened wide as she gasped. In her surprise, Will forced the silk down her throat, muffling a cry. He forced her mouth shut around the cloth before leaning close, claiming her mouth, almost like the kiss of death. He felt her struggling against him, like one last effort in futility to escape, or at least die with her dignity, rather than as some cheap whore. Will held her still, swallowing her sounds of protest, using his tongue to force the cloth in deeper.

He pulled away as she doubled over, struggling to cough, struggling to breathe as he hoisted her into his arms. He worked mechanically as he held her tight to him, not letting her squirm free. Though, even if she did, it wasn't as though she would survive. He would just have to work harder. He walked toward the Wych Elm, looming and ominous above him, perfect for nefarious purposes such as these. He climbed until he could see inside of the rotted tree, holding her like nothing more than a ragdoll as he pulled her into the hollow of the tree. He watched as she stared with desperate, terrified eyes, listened as she struggled and screamed, to no avail.

He could hear her struggling and sputtering and choking from inside the tree as he climbed down, walking away without so much as a second glance. Through the dark and through the trees, Will let himself disappear into the falling black.

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He opened his eyes and he stood in the library again. His eyes met Hannibal’s as his heart began to pound. He gulped down hard as the pendulum fell still and the fire dulled to embers.
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Hannibal reached to him, tucking the pocket watch back into his pocket and stepping closer, fingers brushing over his skin. Will's eyes met his, troubled at what he had done, even if it was all in his own imagination. His hands trembled as he stood there, cold and still, unable to think, or breathe. He could still feel the warm ooze of blood between his fingers, could taste copper in his mouth, could still hear her cries of protest.

It was real. Too real. He didn't know how he knew, how he gathered it from a file based on fractured evidence left by a pile of bones found in the hollow of a tree. But he knew. And he needed to know for certain.

"We need to go back to the Wych Elm."

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Will didn't sleep that night. Instead, he lay tossing and turning all night, until Hannibal finally sat up with him until the sun broke over the horizon. Hannibal told him stories to calm him down, just until the sun was high enough in the sky for them to venture out toward Hagley Wood.

The fog was thick and the streets were empty as they walked, fingers laced tightly as they walked. There was no one around to see them anyways. They walked in silence - what was there to say? - as the Wychbury Obelisk rose up in the distance. The place where they had met, the place where their story had started. Seemed like so many lifetimes ago now.

As they drew nearer to the edge of the wood, Will felt his heart began to pound in his chest and his hands begin to sweat. He'd not been inside since finding her bones, had avoided it like the plague, never coming further than the edge. Even then, he'd not done it consciously, sleepwalking to the place of nightmares and clawing his death omen into the bark of a tree. The very memory drew a twinge of pain to his fingertips, and he prayed that they wouldn't stumble across the tree that he'd clawed in his sleep. He'd not spoken of it to Hannibal, for fear of looking like a madman, and he didn't want him to know now.

Sweat poured down his face in bullets despite the chilly morning air. He found himself hyperventilating at the edge of the cursed forest, the place where his nightmares had begun. Hannibal gave his hand a squeeze in an effort to keep him tethered here, in an effort to calm him down.

"Stay here." Hannibal whispered. "Let me go ahead."

"No." Will protested. "I'm coming with you. I need to…"

"You need to preserve what little stability you have left. I won't have you going into shell shock when you've never seen a war beyond the one in your own head."

"It's my battle to fight." He snarled. This was something that he needed to do.

"And you are wounded, Will. You're vulnerable. Let me fight this for you. There will be a day when you return to this place. You will face your Wych Elm again. But today need not be that day." Hannibal stepped closer to him, running his fingers through his hair. Will sighed. He was right. If he stood in the presence of his dreaded Wych Elm, he risked losing what shred of sanity he had left in him.
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“God, I hate you sometimes. Let me lose my own goddamn mind, would you?” He teased, drawing a huff of laughter from Hannibal’s lips as he pressed them against his forehead.

“You have a beautiful mind, Will. A mind that ought not be cluttered with such dark things. Let me take your burdens from you, okay? If only just this once.” He murmured.

“You know where it's at?” Will inquired.

“I know where it's at.”

“You know what you're looking for?”

“Evidence of struggle. Anything that there is to find pertaining to our Bella.”

He paused, and exhaled sharply. “Fine.”

Hannibal shot him a smug sort of grin.

Will rolled his eyes, letting out a sigh as he nodded, wrapping his arms around his waist. The very touch comforted him, drew him in, rendered him weak. Hannibal smiled against his hair, breathing him in before pulling away from him, turning toward the forest, dark trees looming over him, fog rolling over the ground. He looked so small, yet so sinister, in this light. Will stared as he walked away from him, disappearing into the dark.

He listened to the chirping of crickets and the tweeting of the birds. The whistle of the wind through the trees. The collective silence of anything else, the general stillness, it gave a sort of eerie feeling. Slowly, Will backed from the edge of the forest, feeling his throat begin to tighten and anxiety begin to wrack his bones. The world seemed a much darker place when facing it alone.

He went to the place where his life had started, the place that somehow brought solace now. Despite the feeling of death washing over him the first time, despite standing in the presence of something so seemingly immortal, it was comforting now. The Obelisk stood as cold as it always did, but under fog and silence, he found comfort in its stone. Solid. Real.

He kept his eyes trained on the edge of the forest. He pulled his knees into his chest, closing in on himself, trying to hide away from the rest of the world. From the nightmares that lurked just beyond the trees, from the secrets that lay in the earth. It all seemed so still, so quiet, entirely too frozen, as if time didn't exist here.

He wasn't sure how long it took, but Hannibal reemerged from the trees awhile later, spotting the younger man next to the Obelisk. He carried something in his hands, though Will couldn't quite see through the fog as he hurried toward him. Will rose to his feet to meet him as he came close, holding it out to him.

A fragment of rope. And a long strip of bark, stained red with blood and etched with scratch marks.

“It seems you were right.” Hannibal murmured, dark eyes meeting frightened blue. “Bella was alive when she was placed in the tree.”

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He let out a sharp hiss in pain as he woke. Everywhere stung and burned. In his fingertips, in his legs, in his chest. It was as though his entire body was on fire, skin lit ablaze. He wheezed in pain,
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eyes welling with tears as he clawed at the sheets, only to be met with more pain.

“My name is Will Graham.” Retrace. He could remember the bark. He could remember staring in a state of shock, cold as he began to wonder where he ended and her killer began. “It’s 2:08 AM.” He remembered Hannibal’s arms swallowing him in his embrace, leading him home. He remembered Hannibal leading him to the bedroom and fucking him until he wasn't afraid anymore. “I'm in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England.” He remembered Hannibal leading him into the library, watching the sun setting over the trees as the older man cleaned him. He remembered the crackle of jazz music over the record player lulling him off to sleep. “It’s August 23rd, 1944.” He remembered waking up to his skin lit on fire. He reached down slowly, hands settling in the dampness that gushed from his thighs, drowning in the unmistakable scent of blood. “My name is Will Graham.”

He heard Hannibal stir beside, waking as he finally realized what was happening. Will repeated the mantra, over and over again, fearing that he may lose his mind if he stopped. He looked down to find his legs torn to shreds, broken shards of his own fingernails protruding from the wounds, blood dripping into red satin and pooling around him. His body, his mind, his world was stained in red.

He was going insane.

The light flicked on and Hannibal began to speak, though Will couldn't hear him as he rushed to his aid, trying to stop the bleeding. Will didn't seem to even notice, shrieking the mantra over and over and over, until his throat was lit on fire, even as Hannibal tried to shake him free of his trance. Still, he refused to stop, refused to re-enter this reality. He stood between the nightmare and what darkness lay beneath the light of day, consumed in the fires of hell that lay there.

The fires were all-consuming, threatening to burn him to ash and bone. The hounds of hell stood hot on his trail, clawing violently at his heels, skin torn to ribbons. Reckoning had come for him, burning far beyond the grave. The sacred stars had all gone dark, and Will was here, with hell lapping at his heels. No matter how he ran, it would always catch up to him.

Above his head, written in blood, were the words that had haunted him for lifetimes, words that would haunt him for an eternity to come. He shrieked the mantra over and over until the entire house shook with it, until Hannibal had tears in his eyes from all the shouting, from the begging and the pleading. And above him was written the mark of the damned in his own blood.

WHO PUT BELLA DOWN THE WYCH ELM?

Goner

The moment Hannibal called him back into reality, he carried him into the kitchen and sat him on the counter. Will wanted to protest, tell him that it wasn't sanitary, that a chef such as himself would never want some bloody madman sprawled across his workspace. He didn't have the words, though, but Hannibal knew what he was thinking simply by the expression he made as he ran a rag beneath the water, blood pooling on the counter beneath him.

“This is easier to clean than the bed. Better lighting, too. Lean back. This may hurt.”

It did. Will was roused from his ghostlike stupor, his hazy silence broken by loud hisses and groans as the pain stung through his legs. He would have preferred icy cold water rather than the warmth, if only to numb the pain. He laid flat against the counter as Hannibal slowly ran the damp rag over his opened flesh, curls pooling into a halo around his head as he raised a hand and bit hard into his flesh.

It was so different than the pain he typically associated with Hannibal Lecter. The type of pain that he knew to be caused by Hannibal was an erotic sort, causing him to harden and ache and want. This was far from that, as far as things could be from that. Everything burned, nothing arousing in it, rather just *pain.* Pain and sting and burning. Nothing like the pain that Hannibal inflicted. Though, he supposed, Hannibal didn't inflict this pain. Will had torn himself apart.

In that case, it was perfectly average. This was the sort of pain that he always inflicted upon himself. Stinging. Burning. Fire.

Hannibal’s fingers grazed down his thighs, over the blood-stained skin that had remained untouched. He touched him gently, calming him down, soothing his aches, soothing the demons that swarmed in his mind. How many times would this happen, waking up covered in blood, not remembering how he'd gotten that way? Still, Hannibal’s touch soothed the ach, made him almost feel sane again.

“I need to get out the bits of nail, okay?” Hannibal warned.

Will nodded, eyes clenched shut. He felt Hannibal press cold metal into his wounds, drawing a sharp cry from his chest as he slowly dug out the fragments of fingernails from his wounds. His bloody, ragged nails dug into the palms of his hands, eyes clenched tightly as he cleaned him off.

Hannibal moved away from him for a moment, disappearing from the corner of his eye until he reappeared with a large bottle of scotch and a glass. Will stared wide-eyed, assuming it was for Hannibal - Will had never had anything stronger than half a glass of red wine with dinner once, had never cared for liquor, not with the way that his father had abused it.

Hannibal poured a glass and held it toward the younger man as he propped himself up on an elbow, flinching in pain with each movement. “Drink. You'll be needing it.”

Will stared into the glass of amber liquid, the smell all-too-familiar. His father had always been more of a moonshine, cheap beer, and whiskey kind of guy. This was far out of his price range, but the basic scent was the same. Strong. Bitter. Like it might rot your insides if you actually downed it. Still, he obeyed, raising the glass to his lips and downing what had been poured for him, letting it

scorch his already-raw throat, savoring the burn of it. If nothing else, the pain distracted from the burn in his legs.

He felt dizzy the moment that it settled in his belly, lightheadedness leaving him swaying, the world beginning to bend around him. He exhaled slowly, the pain beginning to dull, like he was no longer part of his body, just something resting inside of a suit of skin. He fell back against the counter again after a moment, lying flat, eyes picking out shapes in the paint on the ceiling.

“I'm going to stitch you up, okay?” Hannibal warned, reaching for what seemed to be a box of medical supplies. Medical tape, bandages, needle and thread.

“You know what you're doing, doc?” He inquired, voice a bit hazy.

“Of course. My father was a doctor. In our time hidden from the war, my time was… significantly freed up. My days were filled with reading old medical books. Practicing on Mischa, when I could. I could be certified if I wanted to be.” He explained. There was a pinch as he pressed the needle into his skin and laced it through, pulling tightly enough to pull it closed.

“Why don't you? Get certified, be a doctor.” Will inquired before letting out a soft groan, feeling the pain from a distance, faintly acknowledging how badly it would hurt once the alcohol wore off.

“Perhaps I will, one day.” Hannibal chuckled. “Though perhaps my love for anatomy would be better suited in the culinary arts. I've always been better with a butcher knife than with a scalpel.”

“I think you should be a doctor. It pays better. Then, when I turn 18, we’ll go join the army together. You be an army doctor, I'll fight in the trenches. You can patch me up when I get hurt.” He felt dizzy, lightheaded as he mused about fantasies of war. He supposed dying in the war would be a far more noble death than clawing himself open until he bled out. “Or you could hold me when I get shot and lay dying. I don't think I can imagine a better death. Dying in your arms.”

Hannibal tied off the stitches before moving onto the next wound, a particularly nasty-looking gash. “Don't go so far into the dark, William. Neither one of us were ever meant for the trenches. War will not take you from me. I vow to it.” Hannibal swore. “I won't let it take you from me.”

“I told you the first day I met you, Lecter. I'm not a runner.”

“And I told you that you are. It's not running away if I keep you from it. It's not running if I singlehandedly stop the war with my bare hands to keep it from touching you.”

Will just hummed in reply. What was to be said? Any reply was pushed away as he lay under the influence. Instead, he stayed still, waiting as Hannibal worked in silence until he finished.

“Finished. We need to get you clean, though. You're a mess.” Hannibal murmured, fingers ghosting over bloody thighs. He was lying pooled in his own blood, the two of them naked from the night before, Will tipsy and tired. There was something so vulnerable about the situation, so compromising. Will spread his legs, feeling the slight twitch in his cock. Must have been the alcohol, or the fact that somewhere in his mind, he knew that he wouldn't have another chance once the booze wore off.

Will watched from the corner of his eye as he shuffled around the kitchen, cleaning up what he could. Will lay still on the counter, unsure if his own two legs would be strong enough to carry him back to bed. Wondering if he would be able to stand in the first place, or if he'd just fall down.

Wondering if he could go back to the bed with blood-stained sheets, the bed where he had lost his mind that night. Wondering if he could stay awake until they found her killer, or if he would be driven to insanity first.

And then there was Hannibal, and all of the fears seemed to ease. He stood naked and covered in blood, but just as gorgeous as ever. Strong in his build, shoulders cocked back as he walked with perfect posture. Will wanted to touch him, to be touched by him, if only to make the terrors go away. If only to stop the pain in his chest, if only to make him feel alive again.

“Make love to me, Dr. Lecter.” Will moaned breathily, inviting the contact despite the mess. Despite the fact that his thighs were stained red and he was rolling in his own blood. Despite the fact that his nails were still cracked and bloody. Despite all of it. He wanted to be touched. He wanted to be fucked.

“I'm not a doctor, and you're hurt.” He chuckled softly. “Sex would only make you more susceptible to further damage, whether it be tearing or infection… You're too drunk to consent. I can't.” Hannibal explained, though Will wasn't sure who he was trying to convince.

“Fuck all of that. I'm hurt. Booze won't last forever and the pain’s gonna come back. Fuck me, make me remember it. Until I get better.” Will pleaded. “I need you inside of me, Han. *Please.”*

“Will…” He began to protest.

“Just one time. Please, Han.”

Hannibal let out a sigh of defeat, though he didn't seem all that defeated, rather giving him a weak smile. He returned to the edge of the counter, taking his place between his legs as his fingers grazed down his sides, touching him like a work of art. Will sighed beneath his touch as he ghosted over every part of him, every inch. Will let out a shuddered sigh, basking in the way that Hannibal treated him with all the reverence of a god, even covered in blood, even though he was losing his mind.

Will watched as Hannibal raised a red-stained hand to his lips, pressing two fingers into his mouth until they were slick enough to enter the younger man without pain. He was still open from the night before, just needing a little something to make the movement a little easier. He let out a sigh as his fingers pressed past his rim with ease, the familiar spread of his body as it relaxed and opened to the older man. He let out a quiet sigh, then a strangled moan as he began to massage against his prostate, cock leaking against his belly.

This was where he found himself to be most comfortable, to be the most alive. Under Hannibal’s skilled fingers, eyes staring down at him like he was a masterpiece, a work of art. The pleasure wasn't quite so intense this time, alcohol dulling the sensation, reducing him only to quiet moans rather than unabashed cries and pleas. Still, it was good, just the feeling of being touched, just the feeling of being filled.

“You're certain that you aren't too hurt?” Hannibal inquired, reaching up with his free hand to stroke him, hand pumping steadily around his cock. “I won't forgive myself if I hurt you any further.”

“I'm sure. I want you to make love to me. I need you to make love to me.” Will insisted.

Hannibal continued to pump his fingers in and out of him, fist setting a brutal pace as he stroked him. “Why? Now of all times?” He queried.

“You're the only thing that makes me feel real.”

Hannibal let out a quiet sigh, pulling his hands free and reaching up to run a hand through his curls. He reached with his other hand and pulled him forward, legs parted and wrapped around his waist, hole open and exposed for him. The blood was wet and sticky beneath him, smearing over both of them as it dripped from the counter, but it didn't seem to matter. All that mattered was this moment, the two of them, falling in together a million times. Leaning forward and steadying his throbbing length against his rim, Hannibal claimed his mouth, kissing him deeply. Like he meant it.

The older boy swallowed the soft whimper that escaped his throat as the older boy pushed past his rim. It stung this time, more than usual, the stretch and burn as he split apart to accommodate his length and girth. There was less lubrication, the feeling threatening to tear him in two, but he decided that he liked it. The sting, the burn, reminding him who he solely belonged to. Will’s legs pulled around the older boy’s waist, pulling him in deeper, despite the stretch, despite the sting, despite the tugging in his stitches.

He could feel his stitches tugging, and absently began to wonder if Hannibal would have to redo them. Another shot of liquor and he would be alright, all of it worth it for the pleasure, the intensity, the conjoinment. He wrapped his legs tighter, urging him to move, *begging* him to move.

“Careful.” Hannibal warned, feeling his anticipation and need, knowing that he wanted to be taken roughly despite the consequences. Will let out a soft whine as he began to move, setting a slow, steady pace inside of him. He moved purposefully, striking just against his prostate as he clung tightly to him, holding onto the older man for dear life.

He clung to him like he was all that mattered, clung to him like he might die should he let go. Like he was the only thing tethering him to sanity, like he was the only thing keeping him from falling over the edge into madness. He buried his face into the crook of his neck, fingers leaving on his skin and fingerprint bruises in his flesh. Hannibal’s lips suckled at his neck, bruises blooming across his throat as his thrusts began to pick up speed, though not nearly enough. Not enough to pull him out of his head, not enough to make him *feel it.*

“Harder.” He begged, the slow pace positively agonizing. He wanted it harder, hard enough to make him forget, hard enough to make his mind go blank, hard enough to make him feel it. He wanted to feel the aftershocks through him for days, wanted to remember this every time he shifted for the next week. But Hannibal was careful with him, not daring to hurt him.

“Will…” He murmured in quiet protest. “You are hurt. You've been through a traumatic experience, rough sex isn't what you need right now. I won't risk hurting you further. You don't need domination, you need compassion.”

“I need to be fucked. I need you to make it hurt, I need you to keep me here. I need you to make me stop thinking.” Will begged. He needed it. He needed to stop thinking, needed to stop thinking about how close her killer was getting, needed to stop thinking about how he was losing his sanity. He needed to lose himself in the primal carnality of sex.

Still, Hannibal kept a steady pace. He moved slowly, purposefully, but refused to go faster, or harder. It was like the first night, slow and gentle and careful. Passionate, good, but Will was more experienced now. He knew what he liked, knew that he liked to be manhandled, knew that he liked

the ache and burn that lingered for days. He liked losing himself to the pleasure washing through him, liked to drown in it, rather than simply floating, left to his own thoughts through the lapping water. He wanted to be caught in the currents, wanted to drown in it, wanted to forget that anything else existed.

“Hurt me, dammit. Make me feel it, *please.”* He begged, jagged fingernails digging into his flesh as his teeth clamped down into his shoulder. He bit down hard, digging his teeth into him, tasting the blood as it exploded into his mouth, sharp and metallic, warm on his tongue. He wanted to mark him up, make him angry enough to fuck him harder.

Hannibal instead pulled away from him, slowing his thrusts to a halt as he settled inside of him. Will groaned, frustrated, needing more than what he was being given. Hannibal thought him broken and mad, surely, and didn't want to risk fracturing what was left of his fragile state. He was pissed and he was horny, annoyed that he was being denied his pleasure, irritated that he could still hear the buzz of anxiety in the back of his head. Even as Hannibal stilled, Will forcefully began to grind his hips, demanding the friction.

“Will.” He boomed, stern and angry, like a parent scolding a child. Will cried out as the older man roughly wrapped around his hips, pushing them hard into the counter, into his own blood, bones reverberating with the force of it. He didn't whimper, didn't beg, instead let it fuel him. Fuel his anger, fuel his lust.

Will squirmed hard, pulling roughly away from his grasp, refusing to be treated like he was something fragile. He kicked off of him, pulling away, cock sliding out of him as he sat up quickly, roughly, sliding across the mess of a countertop. He sat up, claiming the older man’s lips forcefully. If he wouldn't give him what he needed, he would take it for himself.

Will leaped into his arms, legs wrapped tight around his waist as he claimed his lips forcefully. Hannibal, too caught up in the heat of the moment to protest, stumbled backward, back into the kitchen chair. He didn't let him go, taking control for perhaps the first time, refusing to be denied his pleasure, denied his *need.* Hannibal slammed into the chair, Will landing firmly in his lap, the force of it tearing a stitch. He groaned in his pain, though it still felt distant, far away from him.

“My turn.” Will growled, raising up slightly on his knees. He reached between his legs, finding Hannibal’s cock, hard and twitching in his hand as he guided back to his hole. He sunk down hard, swiftly, letting it stretch and burn and tear as the blood oozed freely down his thigh. He was a wreck, and the kitchen looked like a crime scene, and Hannibal was staring up at him with a gaze that looked hungry and aggravated, aroused and annoyed.

Will began to grind against him, gyrating in his lap as he adjusted to the feeling, opening himself up, preparing himself for the onslaught. He could hear Hannibal’s moans and pants beneath him, barely contained as Will’s body moved against him. Slowly, he raised himself back up before slamming back down as roughly as he could, drawing a cry from his own mouth as he slammed against his prostate. The pleasure mingled with pain, from the burn and stretch of his cock against the tight ring of muscle, and the sting in his thighs.

“Will.” Hannibal growled, though he wasn't sure whether he spoke it out of anger or pleasure, whether he wanted him to stop or to keep going. But he didn't stop, wouldn't stop. If Hannibal really wanted him off, it would have been all too easy to push him away. But he didn't, so he kept going, chasing his orgasm, chasing his pleasure, chasing his numbness. Chasing whatever took the pain away.

He began to set a brutal pace, until they were both damn near screaming, fevered and furious as he bounced. The pleasure pulsed through him, until it threatened to drown him. He could feel the reverberations through every inch of him each time he slammed down, the burning in his muscles, the stinging in his wounds, the pain tearing through his hole. The agony mixed with his bliss with each pound against his prostate, the rub of his cock between them.

He bounced until his knees were bruised, until he hole was battered and he could feel himself tearing, until he could hear his heartbeat thrumming hard in his ears. His hands curled tight around his shoulders, digging bloody crescent moons into his flesh, marking and owning him in the same way that Hannibal oftentimes marked him. Took control the way Hannibal oftentimes took control of him.

“You like that?” Will inquired gruffly, voice raspy and hoarse. Hannibal let out a huff beneath him, then a small cry as Will bounced harder, hole contracting tight around his length. “Being my whore, nothing more than just something for me to fuck myself on?”

Hannibal nipped at his throat, over his jaw, feeling the bruises exploding over his pale flesh. He would be sore for days, maybe weeks, if he was lucky, each shift a reminder of him. Each movement would burn just a bit, each glance in the mirror would show bruises splashed across his skin like artwork on a canvas. “You and I both know that is not what I am.” He growled.

Will leaned close, breath hot against his skin, burning against the older man’s ear. He thrust his hips, rocking hard on his lap, the pleasure seeping into his belly, burning and alight. “Isn't it?”

The control was new. Hannibal had always refused to take orders, had always been on top, but now, the rules had changed and Will was the boss. He pushed him back into the chair as the older man’s hands grasped tight around his waist, leaving fingerprint bruises beneath them. Will began to grind harder, savoring the hardness inside of him, feeling each throb and twitch as he picked up speed.

But even the speed, even the pain and burn, it didn't quiet the voices.

They grew louder with each tug of his stitches. They grew deafening with each pulse of agony that ripped through him. Voices that had always hushed whenever he was caught in his pleasured anguish now grew stronger with it, his only escape being swept out from beneath him. He let out a frustrated sound. Frustrated, angry, infuriated, even. His eyes were watering as he tried to block them out, but they just kept coming back, louder and louder.

The voices came back to Bella, back to her killer, back to the omen that had haunted his dreams. The voices came back to bloody fingers and the blank patches in his memory when he had done these awful things that he couldn't remember. The voices came back to his own fears, his own terrors. He was a madman, losing what was left of him to his own madness.

He continued grinding against him, each time growing sloppier as the tears began to sting in his eyes. He continued until he was weeping and Hannibal could see all that was really happening behind those blue eyes. He continued until he trembled and shook in his lap and could no longer keep going. He continued until he settled in his lap, cock sheathed inside of him, the two of them holding connected. Together.

Hannibal wrapped his arms around his waist and held him close as Will buried his face into the crook of his neck. He let out a ragged sob, tears burning hot against Hannibal’s flesh, but the older man didn't seem to mind. He understood, no judgment or smugness in him. Instead, he just held

him. Held him until he stopped shaking. Held him until he stopped sobbing long enough to breathe. Held him until the pain faded to the background.

His fingers brushed slowly through his dark curls, cooing softly until the younger man began to ease. His eyes still streamed with tears, throat tight as he curled closer. Hannibal was the only one who had ever made him feel safe, even in the midst of a hurricane.

“I feel like I'm losing my mind.” Will whimpered. “I don't even know who I am anymore.”

Hannibal pulled back slightly, until their eyes met, the familiar dark eyes offering comfort, those eyes being all he needed to feel calm again. “I know exactly who you are.”

His lip quivered as he pulled closer to him, and for a moment, he believed him. Maybe he wasn't losing himself entirely. Maybe there was a part of him that wasn't going mad, maybe there was hope for him yet.

“I'm sorry.” He whispered. “For jumping on you like that. For hurting you.” He ran a thumb over the bloody places where he'd hurt him in some futile effort for something he thought he needed.

“I know you are.” He murmured, hands trailing slowly up and down his back. “All is forgiven. You took what you thought you needed from me.” He pressed his lips against his ear. “Let me give you what you need.”

Will offered a weak smile, eyes stinging with tears as he buried his face into the crook of his neck again, savoring in the way it felt to be held until the voices hushed. Perhaps this was all he had needed. To hold close to the only man he had ever loved and savor in their conjoinment. Savor in the way that it felt to be one with him. Savor in the way that it felt as Hannibal slowly began to thrust up into him, making love to him where they sat.

And suddenly, there was no more pain and the voices calmed to whispers. Will clinging to Hannibal as though his life depended on it, making love like real *lovers*. Just quiet pants and rolling hips and waves of pleasure rolling through them. The smell of him through the blood gave him a sense of ease. Cedar, chocolate, fire, wine…

“I love you, Han.” Will breathed, clinging tightly to him, as though his life depended on it. They didn't say that often, never felt the need to, because why speak things that they already knew? But now he whispered it like a vow. A promise.

Hannibal let out a shuddered gasp as he buried his face into Will’s neck. He thrust up into him, keeping a slow pace, each movement a reminder that he was real, that he was human, that Hannibal loved him back. So often, Hannibal took him hard and fast, until they were both screaming, but this was different, far from it. These were gentle touches and breathy moans. This wasn't fucking, this was something else entirely. This was love in it's purest form.

It took mere minutes for him to finish, thick white fluid spilling hot between them. Hannibal’s lips stole his, swallowing the sound as he moaned, the two of them finishing together, warmth filling him inside and out, in the literal and metaphorical sense.

“I love you too, Will. Beyond words.” Hannibal breathed.

Will sighed as he settled in his lap, messy and bloody and sore as he came down. Soon, he'd have to face the reality of what he had done. He'd have to redo his stitches, wash the blood from every inch

of him, tend to his wounds. But until then, he sat wrapped in the embrace of the only person that mattered.

“Beyond words.”

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He woke to the clatter of metal against tile, and searing pain.

The pain left him breathless as the steady drip of blood became deafening. He couldn't see, couldn't *think,* blinded by the feeling as he doubled over, grasping at the counter in desperate attempts to steady himself. He let out a choked noise, knuckles white as he clenched his eyes shut.

“My name is Will Graham.” He whispered. Backtrack. He and Hannibal had made love in the kitchen. Then he'd propped him back on the counter and redid the three stitches that had torn open. “It’s… 4:22 AM.” Hannibal had changed the sheets and laid him back in bed before going to clean the blood from the kitchen. “I'm in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England.” He woke up just before dinnertime, though neither of them had the nerve to eat, rather just sitting together in the library, Hannibal asking him over and over if he was sure he was alright. “It’s August 24th, 1944.” He'd fought sleep as long as he could, but it finally pulled him under at around two in the morning. “My name is Will Graham.”

Now he stood in the kitchen, rocking on the balls of his feet as he struggled to will away the pain that exploded across his chest. He forced his eyes open, eyes finding his chest. Stained red with blood, more blood than he had ever seen, even more than what had soaked the kitchen earlier that day. It dripped down his chest, pooling in the floor beneath him.

Someone had done this to him. Someone was doing this to him. Someone was driving him to the brink of insanity, threatening to shove him over the edge, even as he held on for dear life. He was tumbling off the edge, and there was nothing left to save him. Whoever was doing this to him was going to kill him.

Bella’s killer was coming for him. He could feel it. He was the one doing this to him. There was no way that he had done this to himself. He knew who he was. He was Will Graham, brave and cunning, forever running straight toward the thing that could kill him for the sake of justice. He knew who he was. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't fucking crazy.

“My name is Will Graham.” He cried, throat tight as he said it, repeating it like it was the only thing that tethered him to his own sanity. Like it was the only proof he had to show that he wasn't out of his mind. “It’s 4:22 AM. I'm in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England. It's August 24th, 1944. My name is Will Graham.”

He repeated it like a battle cry. He repeated it until he was shrieking, until he heard Hannibal racing down the hallway. He repeated it as the older boy begged him to snap out of it, he repeated it as he pulled him onto the counter, he repeated it until his throat burned like fire, he repeated it until Hannibal ran a wet rag over his flesh. He repeated it as he struggled not to cry out in pain as the blood washed away and what lay underneath was revealed.

He repeated it as his eyes found the bloody Wych Elm carved into his chest.
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The Wych Elm

Will touched gingerly at his bandages as he lay staring across the bed. Hannibal was asleep, had drifted back off as soon as he had gotten Will stitched back up, even as the sun began to rise over the horizon. He could feel dull ache beneath, dulled by medication that Hannibal had given him. Medication to help with pain, medication to help with anxiety. He supposed that they had done their jobs, as the searing pain had dulled to a low ache and the anxiety that had taken its grip on him finally began to ease, and he found himself in a hazy sort of calm.

Somehow, he knew that this would be the last time he would share a bed with Hannibal Lecter.

He didn't know how he knew, but he could feel death calling him. He'd sealed his fate at the Obelisk, when he'd struck an accord with the handsome stranger that had offered his help in finding Bella's killer. He'd sold his soul, and god, had it been worth it. Worth it for the months that he'd spent by his side, for the love that they'd shared. But he could feel it coming to an end as his only friend came creeping over his shoulder, beckoning him into her cold embrace.

His time was coming to an end, every day from the day he'd struck a deal with his mortal god a day borrowed. It had been leading down the path of destruction. They were never meant for a happy ending, but that was okay. As he lay across from him, he found peace in it, peace in knowing that he would die knowing the love of the only man that had ever mattered to him. He was going to meet his fate, but he was at peace.

As the old saying went, it was better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all.

Will gulped down and reached across the bed, closing the gap between them as he scooted closer. He pulled himself into Hannibal's arms one last time, burying his face into his chest. The older man stirred slightly, making a contented noise as he curled his arms tight around him, holding him close. Will breathed him in, savoring the scent of him. Cedar and chocolate and smoke and red wine, the scent that had brought him so much peace over the past months.

The anxiety that had plagued him for as long as he could remember was gone. It was odd, not feeling the need to constantly look over his shoulder, like danger lurked around every corner. But as death's dark shadow loomed over him, he felt an odd sense of peace, as though he was greeting her like an old friend. There was no fear left in him. He had been marked by death a long time ago, and he was ready to meet her where he stood.

He buried himself in his chest, until he threatened to drown in the scent of him, until he was all that was left. He knew that this would be the last time he would ever hold him like this, and it was okay. It would be all okay, so long as he had known how it felt to be held by him to begin with. He could die a happy man here. Like this.

"Thank you." Will breathed. "Thank you for showing me what it was like to be loved." He didn't say it loud enough to be heard, but he heard it, and that was enough. Somehow, he knew that, no matter what happened after this moment, Hannibal would know it too. "Thank you for all of it."

He wasn't sure how long he waited before rising again. He slipped from his arms silently, padding quietly down the hall and into the library. Death was coming for him, and he didn't know when, or where, but he knew that he had work to do before it came. Before Bella's killer finally struck. He

gulped down hard, turning back one last time from the doorway as Hannibal shifted onto his side. This was goodbye to an old friend, and hello to another. Goodbye to one life, hello to the next. He was ready to let go.

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He searched frantically through the files, pages and pages of notes and files scattered the floor as he shifted through what was left. It was a futile attempt to find something to disprove what he already knew, struggling for some sort of lead, some sort of answer. He knew that it was futile, that he would have his answer soon enough, that it would come just before his own death, but he needed something more solid than that. He was content in facing death's cold grip again, but he wasn't so patient to sit and wait for it to come.

As Hannibal always said, he should never confuse himself for anything but a runner. The only difference between himself and his father was the direction in which they were running.

His chest was beginning to sting with every breath again by the time Hannibal rose from bed. Everything was beginning to ache - his thighs, his chest, his hole. But he didn't return to bed in hopes of sleeping it off, or rise to ask for help. Instead, he sat amongst the piles, flipping frantically through each one in hopes of finding anything that stood out.

"Will?" Hannibal called from the doorway.

Will turned back for a moment, giving him half a second of acknowledgment. He feared that giving him any more than that would draw him back in, cause the fear of death to rise in him again because, for the first time, he truly had something to live for. He turned away, though, instead frantically flipping through pages, no matter how futile he knew it was.

"Hmm?" He hummed, only offering a sliver of his attention.

"What are you doing?" Hannibal inquired.

"What does it look like?" Will barked back, unnecessarily short with him this time. Cruel of him, maybe, but he couldn't bear looking at him. Not now. He'd said his goodbyes. He'd had his closure. Now, it just hurt to look back at what he was leaving behind him. "I'm trying to find this son of a bitch."

"You need rest. You're hurt, you're going to over-exert yourself. Bella will wait for you. Just come to bed. Rest." Hannibal pleaded. There was something in his voice that told the younger man that he knew. Knew that it was over, knew that their glory days were over, and it seemed as though he was trying to hold onto them. It took everything in him not to say yes.

"Bella will wait. Her killer won't." Will insisted, rummaging absently through the papers.

"What?"

"Don't you get it? He's coming for me, Hannibal. He's doing this to me." He turned to him with wide eyes, full of pain and sorrow beyond anything that he had known. Hannibal stared at him with something between heartache and worry, which only made it hurt worse as he turned away quickly. "I'm not crazy." He murmured.
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Hannibal took a step closer to him, kneeling on the ground beside him. Will kept his eyes averted, even as the older boy nudged his chin toward him. He kept his eyes downcast, not daring to look up at him. What would lay ahead if he did? He'd fall back into him, never be able to let go. He gulped hard, eyes drifting shut, refusing to look into his familiar dark eyes.

“No one is coming for you, *mažai detektyvas.* There are no monsters waiting in the dark. If there were, I would fight them off for you. You need rest. You're going to make yourself sick.” He warned.

“He's coming. I can feel it. Something wicked is coming, Hannibal, and he's not going to stop until I'm dead. Bella needs justice before it comes to that. I have to find him.” Will protested.

He stared at him with pity, and it took everything in him not to lash out. He was walking a fine line between wanting to crawl back into his arms and wanting to strangle him. He was looking at him like some pathetic madman, like a crazy, suicidal headcase. And perhaps that was exactly what he was, but he didn't want Hannibal to look at him that way. He didn't want to be seen that way, not by the man he loved.

“I didn't do this to myself.” He barked, gesturing to his chest. “He did it to me. He's coming for me, he's teasing me. He's, he's… He's playing with his food. I have to find him. I have to.”

“Will, I saw the knife, I stitched the wounds. You did it to yourself. You were sleepwalking, it isn't your fault, but no one did this but yourself.”

Will slammed down the file that he had been holding, sending it flying across the floor with a loud crack. He was sick of being treated like he was going mad, sick of being stripped of his security, sick of being treated like some fragile thing who couldn't handle the truth, who was too broken to see it for himself.

“I’M NOT FUCKING CRAZY!” He shouted, turning toward him with fire in his eyes, trying to challenge him. There was no fight back in those dark eyes, though, nothing but sympathy, *pity.* Will let out an angry huff and turned away from him, picking up the papers from the floor and pretending to flip through them. He couldn't actually read them if he wanted to, not with his vision going red and blurry. “My name is Will Graham.” He murmured, voice lower now. “It’s 10:43 AM. I'm in the house at the end of Bell End in Worcestershire, England. It's August 24th, 1944. And I'm not fucking crazy.”

Hannibal reached out to him, slowly, fingers gently grazing over his shoulder. It wasn't the normal touch, not really. He didn't touch him like an equal; his fingers brushed over his skin like he was fragile, like he could break at any moment. Like a gust of wind could knock him over and leave him shattered on the floor, never to be replaced.

“Don't.” He hissed. “Don't touch me.”

“Will…” He breathed, looking taken aback. Hurt, even. He looked like a kicked dog, tail tucked between his legs. Will risked only a glance at him, the very sight causing pain to blossom in his chest. His instinct was to apologize, beg for his forgiveness, wrap his arms around him and never dare let go. But this was something that he needed to do on his own.

Will clenched his eyes shut, reaching down and scooping the papers into his arms, grabbing as many as he could stand to carry. He could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him, like he was begging him to stay, not understanding what had changed. One minute, they were making quiet confessions of

worship and adoration, making quiet love, filled with tears and passion, something surely shared only between two people in love. But the next, Will had turned cold, icy, cruel.

He prayed that one day Hannibal would understand. He prayed that one day he could forgive him.

“I need to go home.” Will breathed, staring down at the carpet. It felt like a lie, because where he was headed was not home. This was home. This had always been home. But he needed to run away, as fast as he could, before anyone else got hurt. “I'm not fucking crazy.”

Hannibal followed after him as he made his way for the door, walking quickly through the hallways, legs and chest burning with each step as he clutched the papers to his chest. He didn't slow down though, just kept walking, as fast as he could.

“Will, don't-” He protested, as though he was about to beg him to stay. Will knew that he wouldn't be able to resist if he asked, so he cut him off, refusing to hear him out, having already made up his mind.

“Goodbye, Dr. Lecter.” He said, tears glistening in his eyes as he let the door slam behind him.

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Will had tacked useless papers against his walls, everything he could find pertaining to the cases. Leads that had led nowhere - Maria Reynolds’ report of the missing prostitute, Clarabella Dronkers’ missing person case, Una Mossop’s tale of the traitor and the Dutch Woman. He hung the police report, the composite sketch, the autopsy report, the timeline of events. Paper after paper cluttered his wall, save for one place in the center. A place for her killer.

He supposed he should have seen it before. Had he not been so blinded by infatuation, perhaps he would have noticed. It all added up, all came to one thing, and yet Will had been oblivious. All this time, oblivious, refusing to see what he didn't want to see. But he'd let go, and he could see clearly now. See what he had refused to see before.

He knew her name. He'd splashed the graffiti across the country, asking the question only he knew the answer to. He should have realized it that night, and perhaps part of him had, but another part of him had been desperate for a friend. He hadn't wanted to look into the darkness, had wanted to believe that there was some light in him. And perhaps there had been. Light bright enough to distract from the darkness that lurked just beyond.

The blindfold that he so often tied around his eyes should've been his next clue. Red silk, just like the cloth found in Bella’s mouth, the same thing that had ultimately led to her death. It seemed almost symbolic, using the same thing he'd used to kill her to blind him. And Will had been blinded, all right. Too blind to see what was right in front of him.

Then there was the rope. The rope that they'd found decaying and frayed inside of the hollow of the tree. He had bound him in ropes before, tied him up tightly. Will had enjoyed it, enjoyed it enough to not realize what it meant, enough to not understand the implications.

He had known the book he had been reading that day, the book he'd left behind, the book that had never been returned to him. He'd read it to him, had somehow known, though Will had never told
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him that. It had frightened him at the time, but he had chocked it up to coincidence, refusing to see what he didn't wish to see.

He had skill with a knife, and could've been a certified doctor if he wanted to be. He could have sawed off her hand off with surgical precision. He had the ability. He liked knives, too, just like the knife that Will had predicted the killer had used. He had always played with knives, after all, even that first night.

He had stared at the wall for days, staring at the blank spot, trying to find some way around it. Trying to find some way to prove that there was someone else. But there was no one else. There had never been anyone else. It had always been him, all along, all these months. There was no denying the monster that had lurked inside of him any longer. There was no denying any of it. Not anymore. He couldn't keep looking away.

He hung his picture in the center of it all, the word ‘KILLER’ scribbled beneath. He stood staring. No denying. No turning back.

Hannibal Lecter had put Bella down the Wych Elm.

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The moonlight shone through the trees as he walked the beaten path, the same path he'd taken every night in his dreams for the past year. He didn't know how he remembered to come back, or why he trusted the memories of dreams, but he continued through the forest, nearly silent as he thumbed at the cool metal of the gun tucked in his waistband.

He didn't know how he knew that he would be here. He supposed they shared some sort of connection, supposed they always had. Their conjoinment didn't sever with the realization of what he was. It was still there, even if Will wanted to break the bond that had grown between them. But they had begun to blur, and he doubted that either of them would be able to survive separation.

He came to the small clearing, nothing but the dead Wych Elm cloaked in shadow. His eyes caught sight of what sat beneath it next - or, rather, who. Hannibal, wearing the same thing he had worn the night that they'd met. His suit, just a size too big for him. His fedora, hanging over his face, cloaking his eyes in shadow. A cigarette hung from between his lips, the tip glowing through the shadows as he puffed at it.

Will didn't pull his gun until his eyes caught him. Symmetrical, almost, how they ended up here. The same way that they had begun, in the place where it had all started.

“You and your guns.” He tutted, head shaking like he was disappointed as he rose to his feet, stepping into the moonlight. The night was clear tonight, stars lighting up the sky, half moon shining down on the two of them. Will kept his gun pointed. It was odd to have him like this now, kept beneath the barrel of a gun. After all that they had been through together, it was an odd and terrible thing to think of him this way. To see him for what he really was.

He looked down and drew the cigarette from his lips, smoke gathering in the air between them before being whisked away with the wind. Will gulped, unsure of what to say. The man that he had loved, a killer, a murderer, stringing him along, and for what? He just stared at him, gun pointed.
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There was a coldness in him now. There wasn't the usual warmth and concern, not really. He almost seemed disinterested, if a bit disappointed, though the disappointment was well hidden. He only ever showed what he wanted to be seen, hiding everything else in cold disinterest.

“I wondered how long it would take for you to find me.” Hannibal murmured, taking half a step forward. Will took a step back, keeping the distance. “To realize who I really was.”

“I've known. The whole time, I think I've known. I just didn't want to see you for what you were.” Will confessed, finger toying at the trigger. He wondered if he would be able to pull it should he need to, if he would ever be able to kill the only man that he had ever loved.

Hannibal took a step closer and grabbed the end of his gun. Will nearly pulled the trigger in surprise, but refrained as the older boy pressed the tip of the gun into the center of his own chest. Should he decide to pull, put an end to the monster, he wouldn't stand a chance, though he still carried himself as though he had the upper hand. He supposed that he most likely did. Hannibal always did seem to carry the eternal upper hand.

“What am I, then?” He inquired, or perhaps challenged, eyeing him as though he was trying to provoke him, see what he was capable of, head cocked up, cigarette hanging from his mouth almost carelessly.

“You're a killer.” Will answered, the last word coming out timid, breathy. It was the first time that he'd said it aloud, the words somehow making it feel more real, more undeniable. As if it wasn't already solid enough.

Hannibal gave him a crooked grin before turning away from him, hands tucked in his pockets as he gazed up at the stars. For once, the sky was clear and full of stars. Hannibal stared up at them, rather than looking at the boy that he had once loved. Will suddenly began to wish that he could go back, pretend that it hadn't happened, that he hadn't seen through his self-made fog, go back to loving him. But there was no going back now. Not now that he knew what he was.

“Why'd you do it? Why toy with me for so long?” Will inquired. It seemed like the most important question, even if it was the most selfish. “Why make me fall in love with you?”

“That wasn't me, *mylimasis,* I made you do nothing. You simply fell in love with me. Of your own volition, of your own free will. I only wanted to get close to you, whisper through the chrysalis, see what came through. Love, though… That was of your own doing, I'm afraid.” He answered, mind somewhere else, like he was floating amongst the stars.

Will gulped, tears in his eyes, mourning the loss of all that they'd had. He still loved him, nothing could erase those feelings. But all that they'd had was a lie, all built around a dark secret kept within the hollow of the Wych Elm. He wanted to mourn, wanted to grieve, but now was not the time. He wondered of there would ever be time.

“Who is she?” He inquired, trying to move the conversation away from them, fearing that he may break down should he talk about the life they'd lost. “Who is Bella?”

Hannibal raised his cigarette back to his lips, continuing to stare up into the stars. Will desperately wanted his attention, wanted him to come close, wanted to tell him that it was never true. That he didn't put her down the Wych Elm, that he was an innocent man. But he didn't, and he didn't look at him. He suspected it was because it would be too painful, because none of it was true.

“She was a friend. At least, I believed her to be a friend. Or, perhaps much more. But she betrayed me.” Hannibal murmured, eyes coming down from the stars and staring into the dirt. He didn't look ashamed, or even sad. Perhaps just slight disappointment, like he didn't like the way that things had turned out between them. Perhaps he would have the same look when he reminisced about their time together one day.

“What was her name?” He inquired.

“Alana. Alana Bloom. I met her in Florence, just after Mischa’s death. Before I'd found my place in the world. I met her on the streets where I became a man.” He explained, flicking the end of his cigarette. “I called her Bella. It means ‘beautiful’ in Italian. It seemed fitting.”

“What happened? Why did you kill her?”

“She betrayed me. I thought her my lover. She guided me through the streets of Florence, we traveled the world, even through the war. Until we at last settled here, in the house at the end of Bell End.” He reminisced, a distant look in his eye. “I wanted her to marry me. And then I found out.”

He flicked his cigarette into the dirt, putting it out with his foot. He pushed his hands into his pockets, eyes gazing upwards into the heavens. Will’s guard began to lower, against his better judgment, knowing what he was capable of and yet trusting him all the same. Silly thing, truly.

“I was little more to her than a cover-up. Something to draw away the eyes of the masses as she made love to her mistress. In *our* bed. I found them there. Making love to someone I thought only to be her friend. Miss Margot Verger. In our bed.” He snarled. “Lying whore.”

Will’s hand tensed around the gun again, fearing that he may lash out at him. May attack simply because he was angry and he was there. But he stayed calm, inhaling deeply And gathering himself again.

“I killed my Bella the next day. I had moved on from her, was living my life in peace, until I saw that she had been unearthed in the papers.” He turned toward the younger man’s, dark eyes meeting his through the darkness. He took a step closer, and Will began to ease. He didn't look angry, just… nostalgic. “Until I found you.”

Will gulped, lowering his gun as Hannibal inched closer, eyes staring him down like he did just before they made love, just before he hoisted him into his arms and laid him onto the bed, just before the two became one. Will stared up, as entranced by him as he always was, like he was looking into the eyes of God.

“I found you, and everything changed. My peaceful life turned upside down and there you were, a boy in the wrong place at the wrong time, only to stumble across my mess. Only to find your life intertwined with mine. Only to change everything I had ever thought, or believed.” He breathed, inching closer, eyes locked. “I felt myself feeling things I never thought possible. I found myself risking everything for the boy who found the girl in the tree.”

“Why me?” Will whispered, voice barely carrying over the crickets and the wind. “Why bring me in, why whisper through the chrysalis?”

“I wanted to see what might happen.” He breathed as he came close, fingers curling around the base of his neck as he claimed his lips.

Will melted into his kiss, just as he always did, this time no different. For a split second, it was as though nothing had changed. Hannibal's lips still fit perfectly against his, their hearts still beat in sync, their conjoinment still started at the soul. They were still all that they had always been, all that they always would be. Will pulled close to him, letting himself believe that maybe they could stay like this for the rest of eternity.

And then he felt the blade split through him.

It dug straight through the center of the tree that had been etched into his flesh, digging straight through the place where Bella had been left to rot all those years ago. He let out a breathless cry, Hannibal swallowing the sound as he held him upright, not allowing him to double over in pain. Will didn't fight it, even as the blade twisted and speared deeper, even as the blood pooled against flesh. He just kept clinging tighter to him, even through his lover's violent betrayals and violent delights.

Hannibal pulled from his lips, rather wrapping him in his embrace as the boy trembled in his agony. The scent of smoke and chocolate and cedar and wine was intoxicating, calming even as the pain ripped through his body. He clung tightly to Hannibal, leaning into the man who had caused him so much pain, clinging to him even still.

"I had hoped that you would know me. Hoped that you and I were one in the same. I'd hoped you'd have the same taste for blood. I thought that I may have seen the potential of it in you, but I was staring at an imperfect reflection of myself." Hannibal murmured as they rocked, holding him close, fingers brushing through his curls. "Identically different, you and I."

Will let out a whimper, burying his face into his shoulder, praying that he would have mercy, that he would love him enough to forgive him, to spare him. To change for him, to be the man that he thought he was. But no mercy came, no forgiveness, no ease to the pain. He just held tighter, and ever tighter.

"The righteous and the wretched can never truly be happy. We cannot carry on this way. I can never be your partner in justice and righteous indignation. You can never be my partner in crime." Hannibal murmured. "We're identically different, conjoined at the soul. We can't live without each other… But we most certainly cannot live with each other."

Slowly, he lowered the boy to his knees, leaving him to clutch at the wound as blood gushed from him in buckets, soaking through his clothes as he trembled. He watched from the corner of his eye as Hannibal stepped closer to the tree, then reemerged from the shadows with rope in his hands.

"I killed Bella because she betrayed me. Now you have betrayed me." He said, voice like stone as he knelt down and pressed the rope into his flesh, binding him in the way he had done before. Only this time, he wasn't such a willing participant. "I saw the look in your eyes. I assume that the police are on their way?"

"No. *No."* He objected.

"Then I expect they soon would be. You did not intend to let me leave here a free man. You would deny me my life."

"No. Not your life. Never your life."

“My *freedom,* then.” He hissed, tugging tighter at the ropes, Will only letting out a sob in response. He had expected it to end this way, greeting death like an old friend, but it didn't mean that it didn't hurt.

Hannibal leaned in front of him as he bound his hands, tying them together like a man in prayer. And perhaps he was. Praying to his only god that he would let him go, take him home and let him live. Let them find a way to live without the blood and the pain. His lip quivered as he prayed, but it was to no avail. This was their bloody end.

“I love you. I love you.” He whimpered, staring into familiar dark eyes.

“If it makes a difference, *mylimasis,* I fell in love with you too. A fool, I was, but I did. It was real. If that offers you any solace.” He murmured, only drawing a sob from his chest as the older man pushed a hand through his curls. “It’s okay, *mylimasis.* You solved your puzzle, you solved your crime. You can rest easy knowing the truth. *Mažai detektyvas…* Just wade into the quiet of the stream.”

He lifted him gently, pulled him into his arms like he used to whenever he took him to bed as he drifted off in the library. This time, though, he was sobbing, begging, pleading, even as Hannibal murmured quiet comforts into his ear, like he was almost remorseful of what he had done.

He kissed his forehead before placing him into the hollow of the tree, and Will watched as a tear slid from the edge of his nose and onto the earth beneath him.

“Just wade into the quiet of the stream.”

Hannibal could hear the boy who he had loved continuing to struggle as he walked away. Will cried out to him as he disappeared into the darkness, leaving him in the same tree that he had left Bella. Slowly, he felt the black of death wrap around his shoulders, taking him into her cold embrace. Just as he had always known her, taking what he owed.

But perhaps it was better this way. There was no living with him, no living without him. Perhaps death was the only way out of this unholy union. Death had always been their final destination, had known from the moment they had struck their accord. Death had always been where this road would take them. And, just as it had been promised, death was where it took him. And like an old friend, he let her take him into her open arms, wading into the quiet of the stream.

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WHO PUT WILL GRAHAM DOWN THE WYCH ELM?

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